

Wedding Night Late Ten Years Chapter 1-10

Chapter 1

Young armored warriors on horseback appeared outside the skirt of the imperial city's western gates. The general of the warriors wore a black armor, his hair was tied up but the wind fluttered some of his loose strands of hair. A weapon was suspended on the general's armored back and he sat upright on a snow white Ferghana horse. The warriors behind the general wore navy uniforms under their armors.

'Xiao Ha, how far are we from the imperial city?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Xiao Ha looked into the distance for the imperial city's visible landmarks. 'About two to three miles. If we whip the horses we'll reach the imperial city within one shichen (large-hour = two hours).'

Chen Quan Ran gestured for his horse to slow down and his men followed his lead.

'General, why are we stopping?' Xiao Ha asked.

Chen Quan Ran pointed to the direction of an inn. 'There's an inn over there. Let's eat and rest at the inn. We can head to the imperial city tomorrow.'

Xiao Ha frowned. He pulled the rein and his horse stopped next to the general. 'What about Madam? General, why do you want to rest when we're near your manor in the imperial city? What if Madam's illness-'

'Do you believe my grandma is ill?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Xiao Ha refrained from offering another opinion.

The general was in charge of the Northern Empire's (China) army – Chen Quan Ran. In the Northern Empire, citizens might not know the emperor's name, but they all knew of General Chen Quan Ran's name.

Since the general was five or six years old he was taught war strategies. When he was fourteen years old he earned a hero status.

The general was twenty-four years old, but he conquered many territories for the Northern Empire. He won many battles over the last ten years and he subdued the military forces of Yuenan (Vietnam, South of China) and the Western Liu territories, which vastly expanded the Northern Empire.

Ten days ago a messenger from the general's manor was sent to the general's army base camp. The messenger presented a letter to the general, which informed the general's grandma was gravely ill. For ten years the general received countless letters, which all stated his grandma was gravely ill. But the general kept a spy at his manor. The spy would always secretly send a different messenger to the army base camp if the general's grandma pretended to be ill as a scheme to lure the general back to his manor. However, ten days ago was an exception because the spy didn't send any messengers to inform that the general's grandma wasn't ill.

The general had reservations his grandma was ill. But he reasoned he hadn't returned to his manor for ten years so it was time for him to be filial and visit his grandma. He ordered his lieutenant Xiao Ha and five of his men to pack lightly to return to his manor with him.

Zhang Liulan was an inn west of the imperial city. Although the inn was in a remote location, but within ten miles it was the only inn. So the inn encountered many guests who stopped at the inn to rest before heading to the imperial city.

A fuwu yuan (waiter, to serve) saw the general and his men jumped down from their horses and the fuwu yuan rushed outside the inn to serve them. 'Esteemed guests, are you stopping here for a meal?'

'Give us the inn's best rooms, food and a wine jar. Make sure you take good care of our horses,' Chen Quan Ran said.

‘Yes esteemed guest. I promise the inn’s services will satisfy your needs,’ the fuwu yuan said.

Chen Quan Ran was accustomed to a life of a warrior and he had little patience for pleasantries. Despite his years of warfare, his natural handsomeness didn’t deteriorate. Instead over the last ten years he became more handsome and manlier.

The fuwu yuan led the general and his men to a clean table. The best food and a wine jar was brought to the table as instructed.

‘General, if I’m not mistaken then I remembered you have a wife. I heard the young Madam was chosen by Madam... and the young Madam was raised by Madam since the young Madam was a child,’ Xiao Ha said. He saw the general’s warning look and he lowered his voice. ‘General, at the army base camp it’s not a secret that for ten years you refused to return to your manor because you’re scared to see your wife.’

‘Who did you hear this nonsense from? I’m a grown man. Why would I be scared of my wife? My wife is a child who hasn’t been weaned off milk,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran spoke loudly, but he shuddered a little on the inside. He remembered ten years ago he was allowed to return to his manor to visit his grandma. But his grandma seized that opportunity and she persuaded him to marry a child bride. That year he was fourteen years old. He was a child himself and his parents died long ago so he didn’t understand the relationship between a husband and wife.

Chen Quan Ran’s grandma was the head of the household, and if ten years ago he dared to oppose his grandma then he would be exiled from his manor. He was forced to agree to marry his child bride. But on his wedding day he put an ugly frog in his child bride’s hands... his child bride fainted. He didn’t want to face his grandma’s wrath so he escaped to his army camp. In the last ten years if he had to receive the emperor’s edict at the imperial palace, he would only pass by his manor on the way to the imperial palace.

Chen Quan Ran forgotten what his wife looked like. He only remembered she was a petite and a gentle bred young girl. His wife was the kind of female he hated the most and he wanted to be far away from his wife as possible.

‘General, your wife ten years ago was a child. What if the young Madam has grown to be a beauty?’ Xiao Ha said.

Xiao Ha joined Chen Quan Ran’s army since Xiao Ha was fifteen years old. Despite Chen Quan Ran’s seniority, Xiao Ha and Chen Quan Ran’s relationship was like blood brothers. Xiao Ha knew Chen Quan Ran’s personality almost as well as Xiao Ha knew his own personality.

Chen Quan Ran was born into a military family. Although Chen Quan Ran’s father died on the battlefield, if his father was alive his father would be proud of him. Two generations after his grandpa was general, the Chen household’s army force had increased tenfold. The Chen army was the chief protector of the Northern Empire.

Chen Quan Ran respected and treated his men as equals. He despised corrupt court officials who oppressed citizens and only knew how to eat and sleep. Some of those kind of officials were eating at the inn.

‘Those who are ignorant of what labor means and speak nonsense but regard themselves as wise are loathsome. Let us not speak of those who are born to live idle lives. Those kind don’t dare to show their teeth when they laugh and fall unconscious for three days and three nights at the sight of an insect. They are only deserving of being looked upon with disdain,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

(CQR is discussing with his men a proverb from The Analects of Confucius – ‘Learning without thought is labor lost, thought without learning is perilous.’ i.e. CQR is implying he detests people who are spoon fed and can only regurgitate knowledge without thinking for themselves.)

Chen Quan Ran saw two short young men walked into the inn who looked like the kind of weaklings Chen Quan Ran detested. The two young men carried bulky bags. Chen Quan Ran was especially drawn to one of the young men who was dressed in white silk clothing that was embroidered with chrysanthemum. Chen Quan Ran thought the young man in white was strangely too beautiful, his skin was snow white, his eyebrows were elegantly arched, his thick eyelashes curled, his lips were peony red and his black hair was tied above his slender neck.

Chen Quan Ran stared at the young man in white's eyes that shone like stars. Chen Quan Ran thought the young man in white's steps were dainty and he had a cold graceful aura. Behind the young man in white was another weakling who was dressed in clothing appropriate for a servant.

The two young men walked passed Chen Quan Ran's table and they sat on the table opposite to Chen Quan Ran's table. The young man in white spoke softly to a fuwu yuan.

'Do you men see those two young men? Their bodies are like sticks, their shoulders and hands cannot bear anything heavy. If all young men of the Northern Empire were like them then within three years the Northern Empire will be lost,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran didn't raise his voice, but his table was near the two young men's table and Chen Quan Ran's natural speaking voice was loud from years of giving orders.

The two young men turned around and they looked at Chen Quan Ran. Chen Quan Ran eyes were focused on the young man in white who looked at him for a long time as if the young man in white was judging him, it made his skin itchy. Chen Quan Ran didn't get a chance to react when the young man in white glared condescendingly at him.

Xiao Ha was sitting next to the general. He laughed because the young man in white dared to dismiss the general. 'General, the two young men do look small and weak, but their glares are powerful.'

Mo Lan ignored Chen Quan Ran's mockery of her body. She suppressed her anger and she greeted his mockery with a glare.

Chen Quan Ran rubbed his chin and he stared admiringly at the young man in white. Chen Quan Ran felt the young man in white's glare contained allure and anger. After a long time Chen Quan Ran reasoned the young man in white's skin was too snow white and too smooth for a male... perhaps those two young men were not males. 'Those two young men look like weaklings. But the gentleman dressed in white is too beautiful.'

Xiao Ha wasn't ugly, but he envied the young man in white. 'We're both males, but why is there a big difference between my face and the gentleman dressed in white's beautiful face?'

Chen Quan Ran glared at Xiao Ha. 'Xiao Ha, you are the kind of person who has no sense of what is valuable. Why are you envious of a stick's uselessness? Look properly, their arms and legs are twigs and if squeezed twice their arms and legs are likely to become disabled.'

Chen Quan Ran spoke truthfully without malice. He was used to jesting with his men. But outside the army, his jests were easily seen as insults.

'Master, those men sitting at the table opposite to us are despicable. They used appalling words to describe us. I think I need to make them see reason-' Cheng said.

Mo Lan opened her fan and she stopped Cheng from confronting Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha. Mo Lan laughed politely. 'They are speaking like chicken cock and duck quack. They are related to the miller and his son's donkey.'

(Mo Lan is implying there is no need to argue with Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha who are not speaking on the same wavelength as them i.e. chicken and duck talk different languages. Mo Lan is implying Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha's criticisms are similar to Aesop's fable about 'the miller, his son and the donkey' i.e. criticisms stem from a difference of opinions.)

Cheng laughed because of her mistress' wittiness.

Xiao Ha wasn't a scholar, but his elders forced him to learn some proverbs when he was a young boy. He heard the young man in white's insult and he was displeased. 'General, that young man is disrespectful toward his seniors. We spoke truthfully, but the young man insulted us. He called us chickens and ducks and he said we're donkeys instead of humans.'

Mo Lan wasn't intimidated by the implied threat from Xiao Ha's tone of voice. Mo Lan's glare aimed at Chen Quan Ran was darker than obsidian, it didn't conceal her anger. 'Perhaps in their eyes they are heroes. But in my eyes their insults are no different from a donkey's insult.'

'You disrespectful junior. Do you know who we are?' Xiao Ha said.

Xiao Ha wanted to teach the two weaklings they should be respectful to their seniors, but the general's dangerous smile stopped him.

'Weak scholars are useless, only their tongues are sharp. If they encountered bandits... won't they be scared of death and beg the bandits to spare their lives?' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan momentarily halted their battle of wits, because a group of bandits who carried blades walked into the inn.

'Fuwu yuan, give us your best food and service and we will reward you. But if your service is poor, be careful of your head,' a bandit said.

The fuwu yuan panicked and Xiao Ha whispered into the general's ear. 'They don't look like kind citizens.'

Chen Quan Ran laughed coldly. He picked up his cup of tea and drank a sip. Then he stood beside the young lady in white. 'Speak of Cao Cao and Cao Cao arrives. Are you scared? Don't worry, I'm someone who is easy to talk to. Young lady if you beg me now it's possible I'll kindly help you chase away the bandits who are likely to cause you trouble first.'

(Chen Quan Ran is referring to Cao Cao who was a warlord during the Three Kingdoms period i.e. proverb is equivalent to 'speak of the devil.')

Mo Lan glared at Chen Quan Ran and she silently sat as if the bandits' arrival didn't affect her.

Chen Quan Ran frowned. He was certain the young lady and her maid travelled together unprotected. He wasn't concerned about their weak bodies as much as he was concerned the young lady and her maid didn't own any kung fu skills. He reasoned the young lady knew she was a beauty so he didn't understand why she wasn't scared to encounter bandits.

Chen Quan Ran noticed the bandits were walking toward the young lady and her maid. He wasn't surprised, because the young lady's silk clothing would attract any bandit's attention. A bandit's blade was used to threaten the young lady's slender neck.

'What beautiful gentlemen you two are. If you two are wise as your beauty then give us some protection taels and your journey will be a safe one,' a bandit said.

Xiao Ha couldn't stand idle and watch the bandits rob the two juniors. He stood to help them, but the general signalled him not to interfere. He didn't understand why the general whose tolerance of bandits was less than him would stop him from helping the two juniors.

Chen Quan Ran shook his head and he smiled. 'No one asked us for our help. We don't need to interfere.'

Chen Quan Ran hated bandits. But he wanted to see if the beautiful demoness would bow her head and beg him to save her. He judged the bandits were easy to subdue so there was no rush for him to do a good deed. He thought it was an opportunity for him to see a good performance.

Chen Quan Ran was amused the beautiful demoness waved her fan under her chin and she acted like the bandits were insects.

‘Brothers, if you want tael there is no need to threaten us. We don’t have silver tael, but we have many jewellery gifted by the emperor and silver ingots,’ Mo Lan said. She smiled and she signalled Cheng to pass the bandits their bags. ‘Brothers, do you want the silver ingots or the jewellery?’

The bandits’ eyes were bright, they thought it was a prosperous day.

Xiao Ha widened his eyes, he couldn’t believe the young man in white wanted to be robbed instead of asking for help.

‘Jewellery? Silver ingots? We want both,’ a bandit said.

Mo Lan shook a finger. ‘The bag fabric used to protect our jewellery, silver ingots and clothes can’t be cut opened by a blade. A powerful master told me if this bag isn’t opened the right way perhaps the opener’s fingers will be injured. Brothers come here and see for yourself.’

The bandits’ greed for silver ingots and jewellery overpowered their suspicious minds. They all approached Mo Lan’s table. Mo Lan opened her bag and a cloud of powder was released into the air.

The bandits forgot about their greed, because they were rolling on the ground and scratching their bodies.

‘Itchy! Itchy everywhere!’ the bandits cried out.

The fuwu yuan who brought out food for the bandits was shocked to see the almighty bandits who entered the inn were on the ground begging for mercy.

Cheng laughed and she kicked the bandits. ‘Stealing is outlawed. Be careful I don’t crunch your thieving bones.’

Mo Lan rewrapped her belongings. Then she stood and she looked down at the filthy bandits. 'This itchy powder is powerful. Brothers, even if you scratch off your skin you'll still be itchy. The only remedy is smearing hyacinth herbs on your skin and it'll stop the scratching.'

The bandits didn't care if they needed to soak their bodies in toxic water as long as the itchy powder wore off. They ran out of the inn to search for hyacinths.

Mo Lan turned around to face Chen Quan Ran and she smiled. 'The Northern Empire citizens believe General Chen is a hero who defends the weak. But the General Chen standing in front of me is someone who is amused seeing others in trouble. It appears the rumours of your heroic deeds are only rumours.' She dismissed Chen Quan Ran's shock that she knew his identity. 'Xiao Cheng, let's leave.'

Chen Quan Ran and his men arrived at the Chen manor the following afternoon.

At the front gate of the Chen manor, Chen Zhong the head caretaker was delegating housekeeping duties to the maids and servants.

Chen Zhong heard the sounds of horses neighing. He lifted his head and he was shocked to see the general on a white horse. 'The heavens, master... master has returned!'

Chen Quan Ran jumped off his horse. He stood in front of uncle Zhong and he smiled. 'Uncle Zhong, it's been a long time since we've seen each other.'

Chen Zhong was overwhelmed to see the general and he quickly ordered a servant to inform Madam that the general is back.

Chen Quan Ran left the Chen manor for ten years and during those ten years, new young maids and servants were employed at the Chen manor. The new maids and servants were in awe of the handsome general. They expected to see a bearded and a dark skinned general. They didn't expect the general was a strong young man who had a youthful handsome face.

Chen Quan Ran ignored the maids and servants' looks of admiration. His main concern was his grandma. 'Uncle Zhong, is it true my grandma is bedridden?'

'Master... perhaps it's better if you see for yourself,' Chen Zhong said diplomatically.

Chen Quan Ran deciphered the hesitation in uncle Zhong's voice as he didn't need to be concerned about his grandma's health. 'Then I'll need to bother uncle Zhong to look after my men.'

Chen Quan Ran flew to his grandma's chamber. He parted the beaded curtains in front of his grandma's bed. His grandma aged, but her complexion was rosy.

Chen Quan Ran was relieved his grandma wasn't ill. He took off his headgear and he knelt in front of his grandma's bed. 'Grandma, I haven't been a filial grandson.' He bowed thrice. His grandma didn't give him permission to stand so he crawled on his knees closer to his grandma's bed. 'Grandma, I'm here to appease you. Grandma, say something.'

Madam glared at her neglectful grandson. She waited until he crawled closer to her and she pinched his neglectful ear. 'You unfilial little boy! I never thought you would dare to disappear for ten years! For ten years I thought of many excuses for you to come home and visit me, but your ears are unfilial as its owner. Are you waiting until I'm nearly a corpse before you are willing to see me?'

Chen Quan Ran let his grandma pinch his ear until his grandma was appeased. He smiled charmingly. 'Grandma what are you saying? Grandma, your body is always strong and healthy. Ten years is nothing. Even if I don't see grandma for fifty years your tigress strength would still prevail.'

Chen Quan Ran and his grandma's conversation was interrupted. The beaded door curtains were parted and a beautiful young lady who wore a green dress walked into his grandma's chamber.

‘Madam, I think it is only right that you reward your unfilial grandson with your staff strikes,’ Mo Lan said.

Madam jumped off her bed, she grabbed her dragon shaped staff and she used it to strike her grandson’s bottom. ‘You unfilial grandson, I wanted to hit you to death years ago.’

Chen Quan Ran couldn’t believe how unlucky he was. He returned home after ten years and he had to meet a beautiful demoness who persuaded his grandma to reward him with his grandma’s staff. But he was curious about the identity of the bold beautiful demoness who dared to oppose him.

Chen Quan Ran didn’t avoid his grandma’s staff. He knew it was wrong of him to disappear for ten years, and if he didn’t let his grandma hit him to appease her wrath then she would want a kung fu battle with him.

Chen Quan Ran underestimated his grandma’s strength. His grandma was passed seventy years old, but his grandma’s strikes were accurate and powerful.

Chen Quan Ran ran around his grandma’s chamber and his grandma chased him with the staff. He noticed the beautiful demoness stood idle and she covered her mouth whilst she laughed. The beautiful demoness’ mockery angered him.

Chen Quan Ran was distracted when the beautiful demoness pulled her cheeks and she stuck out her tongue. The distraction was painful, because his grandma’s staff struck his bottom again. ‘Ah! Grandma, can you use less force to hit me?’

Chen Quan Ran ran away from his grandma. He frowned and he rubbed his sore bottom. He glared at the beautiful demoness who laughed happily whilst he was in trouble. ‘Grandma, who is this demoness? How dare she interfere in our relationship?’

Chen Quan Ran secretly looked at the beautiful demoness. Her skin was snow white, her eyebrows were elegantly arched, her thick eyelashes

curled and her lips were peony red. He thought the beautiful demoness was actually more like a deity who stepped out of a painting. The more he looked at her the more he felt like he had seen her beautiful face before.

‘I didn’t expect at such a young age General Chen was forgetful to this extent. Wasn’t it you who I met yesterday?’ Mo Lan said.

‘You can’t be... ah! Grandma, why are you hitting me?’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘You bad little boy! You deserve to be hit to death! How can you not recognise your own wife?’ Madam said.

‘What? My wife? Grandma, are you saying she’s the little girl that year... who fainted at the sight of the frog I gave her?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chapter 2

Chen Quan Ran was shocked the deity in front of him was the young girl he married ten years ago, Mo Lan.

Chen Quan Ran didn’t expect to meet Mo Lan yesterday at the inn. But when they were reunited yesterday she knew he was her husband.

Mo Lan poured tea for Chen Quan Ran’s grandma, and Mo Lan smiled mockingly at him. But his attention was on her curved eyelashes, little nose slightly tilted upward and her creamy white jade skin. He thought his wife in her green dress looked more beautiful than a spring flower.

Madam sipped her tea. She glanced at her grandson then she looked at Xiao Lan. ‘Xiao Lan, how did you know this little boy is your husband?’

Chen Quan Ran glanced at his grandma and he looked at Mo Lan. He was also curious how she knew he was her husband.

Chen Quan Ran was lucky his men weren't inside his grandma's chamber. If his men saw how enamoured he was by his wife's wit and beauty, his men would think his commanding aura as a general was lost.

Mo Lan stood behind Madam and she massaged Madam's shoulders. Mo Lan smiled at Chen Quan Ran who sat opposite Madam. 'General Chen, you secretly travelled to the imperial city. But it was easy for me to guess your identity.'

Chen Quan Ran felt Mo Lan's voice was soothing as her beauty. It was a pity he never liked gentle young ladies. Their weak tears didn't repulse him as much as the thought of him accidentally breaking their delicate leg or arm.

Mo Lan massaged Madam's arms and she felt Chen Quan Ran was looking at her condescendingly. She wasn't angry. She looked straight at his eyes and she smiled. 'Firstly, General Chen you weren't wearing your official armor but your boots betrayed your identity.'

Chen Quan Ran lowered his head and he looked closely at his boots. There was a golden dragon's claw embroidered on each of his boots.

'In the Northern Empire apart from the imperial family only the Northern Empire General is allowed to wear boots embroidered with a dragon's claw, secondly...' Mo Lan said. She looked at Chen Quan Ran's creased forehead and she smiled. 'General Chen, you command the Northern Empire's army. It's natural for you to have a commanding aura. But even if you are speaking informally your eyebrows are trained to look unyielding.'

Chen Quan Ran knew Mo Lan's words were purposely provoking him, but he didn't know why he couldn't control his anger.

Madam smiled and she looked at her grandson's unyielding eyebrows.

Chen Quan Ran wanted to cry and laugh. It was clear to him that Mo Lan wanted to use a good opportunity to take revenge on him for his jest about how she should beg him to save her from the bandits at the inn yesterday.

‘Thirdly...’ Mo Lan said. She ignored Chen Quan Ran and Madam’s secret glances at each other. ‘Madam kept a painting of General Chen’s father when he was a young man. Although General Chen you are not as handsome as your father, you do resemble him a bit.’

Chen Quan Ran thought Mo Lan’s tongue was sharp, her words successfully insulted him. But he wanted to praise her astute eye sight. Within the short period she was reunited with him, she was able to observe him closely and recognise him.

In the past ten years Chen Quan Ran occasionally thought about his wife. But he didn’t expect the young girl who sat in a red sedan chair ten years ago would become a beautiful deity. He wondered if his wife remembered the first time they met, he lifted the red silk fabric over her phoenix crown headpiece and he put a frog in her hands. Suddenly the feelings in his heart were complex. If he said he didn’t think his wife was appealing then he would be lying. But like in the past he couldn’t force himself to desire a weak female. He didn’t need a female to give birth to the next generation of the Chen household. He wanted a female who could ride a horse alongside him and laughed loudly with him.

Chen Quan Ran could never forget how his gentle mother grieved for his father who died on the battlefield, and not long after his father’s death his mother passed away from immense grief. It was a memory that haunted his heart.

‘Xiao Lan is a wise young lady. I’m proud to love and raised you all these years,’ Madam said affectionately. She gently patted Xiao Lan’s hand. ‘Quan Ran is blessed to marry you in this lifetime. I wonder what good deeds Quan Ran performed in his previous lifetime to meet and marry you in this lifetime.’

Mo Lan felt shy and her cheeks blushed. She looked at Chen Quan Ran, she was disappointed she saw anger and resentment.

Chen Quan Ran felt his heart constricted. In the past he met beautiful young ladies, but no one was beautiful as Mo Lan.

Madam secretly looked at her grandson and Xiao Lan. She was satisfied they were staring deeply at each other.

‘Xiao Lan, your husband finally came home after five years. Xiao Lan, plan a banquet to celebrate Quan Ran’s return,’ Madam said.

Mo Lan was startled when she heard ‘husband,’ but she quickly understood Madam wanted her to go outside for a while because Madam wanted to say a few private words with Chen Quan Ran. ‘Then with Madam’s permission Xiao Lan will go outside to plan a banquet.’

Madam noticed her grandson’s eyes followed Xiao Lan’s back that was retreating outside her chamber. ‘You bad little boy, are you regretful now? You abandoned a beautiful wife for ten years. You also lost ten years of opportunities to make happy memories with Xiao Lan. If in the past you made wiser decisions then perhaps you and Xiao Lan would have two young children who could walk by now.’

Chen Quan Ran looked away from Mo Lan’s back. He pitied Mo Lan, but pity wasn’t going to change his way of thinking.

Chen Quan Ran picked up a cup and he sipped tea. ‘Grandma, what are you saying? The past ten years I’ve been fighting to protect the Northern Empire. Compared to a female’s adoration, fighting is more interesting. I don’t have any regrets.’

‘You blind little boy! Xiao Lan is a treasure amongst thousands of young ladies. She’s beautiful, talented, wise and compassionate. She’s been filial to the Chen household members since she was a little girl. You won’t find another young lady who is as caring and responsible as Xiao Lan,’ Madam said.

Chen Quan Ran laughed. ‘What good is knowing how to embroider, recite poems and paint? They are idle things over indulged young gentlemen and ladies do to waste time. I’m a general. Thinking about how to protect citizens of the Northern Empire is enough for me.’

Although Chen Quan Ran was blessed with a handsome face and born into a powerful household, his way of thinking was the same as his men. He disdained scholarly amusements like playing a guzheng (Chinese zither, a string instrument), singing, reciting poetry and painting.

‘You bad little boy, you didn’t inherit any of your parents’ strengths. When your father was a young general, he was handsome, strong and a scholar. If your father wasn’t an exceptional young man, your mother wouldn’t notice your father. Your mother was beautiful, wise, kind and gentle. Your father was blessed he got to marry your mother,’ Madam said. ‘But look at yourself. When you were a child your teacher taught you how to write, but you used the ink brush as a toy. If your teacher taught you how to play the guzheng, you cut off the strings and used the strings as weapons. How did I have such a strange grandson when your parents were exceptional people?’

‘Grandma, perhaps my parents secretly adopted me,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Madam picked up her staff and she struck the ground. ‘You bad little boy, why are you speaking nonsense?’

Chen Quan Ran knew he angered his grandma. He quickly stood behind his grandma, and he massaged her shoulders. ‘Grandma, I was jesting. Don’t be angry. I rode day and night back home to see you. If seeing me makes you more ill then I’ll be worse than an unfilial grandson.’

‘You bad little boy, don’t think you can make me less angry with your sweet words. Now that you’re back, don’t dream about an easy escape. I will see the emperor. I have spent my life helping to build the Northern Empire. The emperor knows I am a loyal citizen and he will listen to my reasonable request,’ Madam said. She turned around and she glared at her grandson. ‘You are twenty-four years old. You and Xiao Lan have been married for ten years. Xiao Lan isn’t a child bride anymore. She is a young lady, she knows what she can do and she should do.’

‘Should do? Do what?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

'You bad little boy, you dare pretend you don't know? I will hit you to death if you and Xiao Lan don't give me several great-grandchildren to love,' Madam said.

'Grandma, are you jesting? Look at Mo Dan, are you not scared I can accidently break her leg or arm if I am not careful? Then she will be crippled for the rest of her life,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Madam stood and she hit her grandson with her staff.

'Grandma, stop hitting me. I know you are strong. But it is my first day back home, you do not need to hit me this hard,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Madam was angrier her grandson's reflexes were sharp. He easily avoided her staff. She chased him around her chamber for a long time. Then he escaped her chamber and he jumped onto the roof.

'Even if you have strong arms and hands, she won't break easily because you squeezed her a little. You little demon, haven't you caused enough trouble ten years ago when you gave a frog to a little girl and caused her to faint? For ten years you have been a neglectful husband. If Xiao Lan wasn't an understanding and a gentle young lady then your reputation would be ruined by now. It won't make me faint, but I will be embarrassed to call you my grandson.' Madam said loudly. Her throat was dry from cursing her bad grandson. She picked up a cup and she sipped tea. 'If you don't make Xiao Lan pregnant, don't dream about stepping one foot outside the imperial city. If you dare escape the imperial city, I'll use a fabric to strangle my neck for you to see.'

Chen Quan Ran's head hurt after he heard his grandma's warning. He realised not coming home for ten years had angered his grandma more than he expected. His grandma's warning forced him to be together with Mo Lan.

Chen Quan Ran hated gentle and weak young ladies like Mo Lan. But he didn't know why if he thought about Mo Lan's smile, he didn't hate Mo Lan. He thought perhaps it would be easy to grant his grandma's request.

Later that day Madam gathered all of the Chen household's maids and servants to greet her grandson, because she didn't want anyone to think her grandson was an intruder.

Chen Quan Ran's men were honoured to meet the legendary Madam who helped build the Northern Empire. But when his men saw his wife they were shocked she was the young man in white clothes they met at the inn yesterday.

Mo Lan held a banquet for Chen Quan Ran as Madam requested. Mo Lan changed into a formal jade green dress to attend the banquet.

Mo Lan played a song on the guzheng to welcome Chen Quan Ran's men to the Chen manor.

The maids and servants served Chen Quan Ran and his men the food Mo Lan prepared and the wine Mo Lan chose for the banquet.

After the banquet Mo Lan was busy preparing the best rooms for Chen Quan Ran's men. The maids and servants who helped Mo Lan were also diligent and efficient.

Chen Quan Ran's men were in awe of Mo Lan. She was a nineteen year old young lady, but she ran the Chen household in an efficient and a graceful manner.

In the evening Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha sat on the roof and they drank from wine jars together.

'General, the service and food in your home is exceptional but the atmosphere is too stern. I feel more comfortable to sit in front of a camp fire to roast a chicken or a duck and drink wine,' Xiao Ha said.

Chen Quan Ran laid on the roof, and he looked at the stars in the night sky. Although he was the head of the Chen household, like Xiao Ha he wasn't used to eating at formal banquets. He felt more comfortable eating informally with his men.

Chen Quan Ran heard Mo Lan's voice nearby, she spoke gently and firmly to the maids and servants. He thought Mo Lan was still young, but she managed his home like an experienced old Madam.

Chen Quan Ran and his men could see that all the Chen household's maids and servants respected and listened to Mo Lan. When two servants accidentally put chopsticks and cups in the wrong positions on the banquet table, Mo Lan tactfully reprimanded them and they sincerely promised not to make the same mistake again.

'General, your wife is not a simple young lady. Yesterday at the inn your wife disguised herself as a young man, and on her own she made the bandits run away witless. Today your wife was a formidable mistress of the Chen household. It appears Madam has wise eyes,' Xiao Ha said.

Chen Quan Ran lifted his head and he looked at Mo Lan below the roof. He gulped down a wine jar, and he didn't know if he was enjoying the taste of the wine or if he was enjoying the view.

During the banquet Chen Quan Ran's eyes followed Mo Lan's movements. She played the guzheng exceptionally, and most of the night she was busy supervising the maids and servants. When she sat next to him at the banquet table, she lifted her head and she glanced once at him but it disturbed his heart. He didn't understand why his eyes followed Mo Lan everywhere she went. She was clearly a gentle young lady that he didn't desire, but she held his eyes captive.

'I heard Madam made you promise to make her a great-grandmother. General, you're twenty-four years old. Most men your age are fathers to several young children,' Xiao Ha said.

'What are you saying? Confess, did my grandma persuade you to encourage me to grant her request?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Xiao Ha laughed. 'Madam did speak to me about it.'

'Did my grandma asked you to stop me from escaping the imperial city?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

‘General, we battled together for years and finally the Northern Empire can enjoy a period of peace. Madam’s request isn’t unreasonable. General, you know if Madam speaks to the emperor, the emperor will grant her request and the emperor will give you permission to stay home while the Northern Empire isn’t under threat of invaders. General, take this peaceful period as a good opportunity for you and your wife to give Madam several great-grandchildren,’ Xiao Ha said.

Cheng’s loud voice could be heard from the roof. ‘Mistress, yesterday at the inn why didn’t you tell master who you were?’

Mo Lan sighed. There were many things she didn’t know how to explain out loud. She and Cheng travelled outside the imperial city to receive merchandise from merchants, she didn’t expect to meet her husband on the way back home.

If Mo Lan said she wasn’t happy to see Chen Quan Ran then she would be lying. But he didn’t care about her safety and he didn’t recognise her. Naturally she was disappointed, and she hated herself for being happy to see someone who didn’t care if she was alive or not.

‘I didn’t expect master would be a handsome general. Yesterday I was tired and I didn’t look closely at master. But tonight at the banquet I saw how truly handsome master is,’ Cheng said.

‘There are some things you cannot see by only looking at what is on the outside. Whether a person is deserving of respect, first you need to look at their attitude and the choices they make. The person you are worshipping has many weaknesses,’ Mo Lan said.

On the roof Chen Quan Ran was shocked, but Xiao Ha was refraining his laughter.

‘He left home for ten years to battle, but he neglected his grandma who raised him. When we encountered bandits, he didn’t help us but stood idle. He was amused while we were in trouble. He is an unfilial grandson and he isn’t a compassionate person,’ Mo Lan said.

Xiao Ha wanted to laugh, because what the general's wife said was reasonable from her perspective. Xiao Ha didn't laugh, because the general looked like he wanted to jump down and strangle his wife.

'And... ten years ago he purposely put a frog in my hands to scare me so I would faint. His heart was bad since he was a child,' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran frowned. He thought Mo Lan held grudges for a long time, because she remembered clearly how he put a frog in her hands ten years ago.

'But his biggest weakness is...' Mo Lan said. She tilted her back, looked at the roof and she smiled at Chen Quan Ran who held a wine jar in his hand. 'He is a general but he secretly listens to private conversations of ordinary citizens, which is a bad habit.'

Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha were shocked. They didn't expect Mo Lan would notice they were on the roof.

Xiao Ha felt the general's wife was witty and had sharp eyes and ears. Xiao Ha seized the opportunity, he fled whilst the general was shocked speechless.

Cheng blushed because her master heard her praises, but her mistress looked calm.

Chen Quan Ran jumped down from the roof and he stood in front of Mo Lan. Her head was levelled with his shoulders, but she wasn't intimidated by him. 'Now can you see that your master was secretly listening to us?'

Cheng laughed awkwardly. She didn't dare to intrude her master and mistress' private time together, she turned around and she fled.

The wind swept passed Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan.

Chen Quan Ran was curious how Mo Lan knew he was on the roof, because his kung fu was good. He didn't conceal his qi (energy, life essence) on the roof, but it still wouldn't be easy for Mo Lan to detect him on the roof. 'How did you know I was on the roof?'

Mo Lan laughed softly. She pointed at the nearby pond. On the surface of the pond was a reflection of everything on the roof.

Chen Quan Ran's heart pounded fast against his chest. He thought Mo Lan's sharp eyes were deserving of praise.

Chen Quan Ran thought under the moonlight, Mo Lan's creamy white jade skin shone. He didn't see fear in her eyes, he saw provocation in her eyes.

Chen Quan Ran laughed and he swept Mo Lan's hair away from her forehead. 'The person grandma chose is indeed wiser and more observant than ordinary citizens. You didn't forget...' He lowered his head and he leaned his lips on Mo Lan's ear. 'I'm your husband. But you didn't even spare my feelings a little in front of others.'

'Ten years ago when you put a frog on my hands, why didn't you think about my feelings?' Mo Lan asked.

The ugly frog haunted Mo Lan's heart for ten years. If she saw anything that resembled a frog, her skin would be itchy. It was all Chen Quan Ran's fault. Ten years ago she didn't get an opportunity to reprimand him. She was happy he returned, she finally could reprimand him face to face.

Chen Quan Ran stroked Mo Lan's hair. 'Are you taking revenge on me because of the past?'

Mo Lan felt uncomfortable, because Chen Quan Ran was looking at her strangely. She wanted to challenge him to a battle of wits, but under the moonlight and the wind that was sweeping passed their clothes, it made her heart trembled.

Mo Lan stepped away from Chen Quan Ran, but he held her hand.

‘Xiao Lan...’ Chen Quan Ran called affectionately. He saw Xiao Lan blushed and he smiled. ‘Do you know why my grandma wanted me to come home?’ His coarse fingers stroked her soft face. ‘My grandma said we’ve been married for ten years and it’s time for us to give her a great-grandchild.’

‘Why are you saying nonsense?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘If you don’t believe me, we can ask my grandma together. She wants you to give birth to her great-grandchild to inherit the Chen household’s riches and reputation,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan understood her duties as a wife. But she and Chen Quan Ran were separated for ten years, she couldn’t bear his jest.

Mo Lan turned around to leave, but Chen Quan Ran didn’t let her go.

‘Tonight is a good night, the moon and wind are pleasant tonight. Why don’t we have our wedding night that was delayed ten years ago? And... we can give my grandma a great-grandchild...’ Chen Quan Ran said. He lowered his head and his lips slowly moved closer to Xiao Lan’s peony lips.

Mo Lan was nervous and angry. Chen Quan Ran abandoned her for ten years. They didn’t share a good relationship with each other. She didn’t expect he wanted her to be his real wife instead of someone to occupy his official wife title. She didn’t think on his first day back home he would want a wedding night with her.

‘Why are you avoiding me? I’m your husband. Having a wedding night with your husband and giving your husband a child is the heavens’ will,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran stroked Xiao Lan’s stiff back and he wanted to laugh.

Mo Lan put her hands over Chen Quan Ran’s hands, she wanted to remove his hands off her waist and back but he captured her hands. He laughed and he jested. ‘Do you want to use the same itchy powder you used to chase the bandits away on your husband?’

Chen Quan Ran shook a finger in front of Xiao Lan's face. 'You're my wife, I'm your husband and your sky. If you use the itchy powder on your husband, your husband will hit your bottom.'

Chen Quan Ran saw Xiao Lan's cheeks were like pink flower petals, it made him happy and his heart trembled. He hugged her and he kissed her soft lips. Her lips tasted sweet, but it was a pity she bit his lips.

Chen Quan Ran smiled. 'I didn't expect you were a stubborn young lady.'

Chen Quan Ran kissed Xiao Lan a second time, and she bit him harder.

'Don't...' Mo Lan said.

'If you bite me again, I'll kiss you somewhere lower on your body,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan opened her eyes. 'I won't bite.'

Chen Quan Ran saw the shock in Xiao Lan's eyes and he laughed. But his heart wasn't jesting. He kissed her soft lips and he didn't let her escape.

'You... you said if I don't bite you then you won't kiss me. You deceiver,' Mo Lan said.

'If you say that I'm a deceiver then tonight I need to be a deceiver from the start to the end,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran carried Xiao Lan to their chamber.

The moonlight shone through the beaded curtains that slowly descended.

Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan's bodies interlocked on their bed.

Outside Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan's chamber was quiet. The wind blew through the slightly opened window into their chamber. The wind mixed with the sweet spring atmosphere inside their chamber.

Early in the morning, Mo Lan was too tired and she lost all her energy. She opened her eyes and the sweet memories of last night were re-enacted in her mind.

Mo Lan thought perhaps inside Chen Quan Ran's heart she was of little importance to him, but inside her heart he was someone she wanted to lean on for her whole life.

Mo Lan was orphaned since she was born, there was no father or mother in her life. Chen Quan Ran's father raised her whilst he was battling enemies until she was five years old, he died on the battlefield. But before his death he sent her to Chen Quan Ran's grandma.

In the last ten years Chen Quan Ran didn't care about Mo Lan's existence, but she cared about his existence. Each time a messenger came to the Chen household to inform Madam that he won a battle, Mo Lan was happy and relieved.

Mo Lan didn't know if Chen Quan Ran considered her as his real wife. She heard sounds of him sword training and she blushed. But she was angry when she thought about how he ate her easily last night. She wanted to cause trouble for him for a while, she didn't think... it didn't matter anymore, because it didn't change the truth that he was her husband. Sooner or later her body would belong to him.

Mo Lan was about to stand and put on her clothes, but she saw words written in ink on her naked body – 'This is my place of labor. If anyone who is not a maid for this chamber comes near my place of labor, I will kill you.'

Mo Lan stared at the crooked words on her naked body for a while, and she knew who the writer was. She sat upright on the bed, she faced the window and she yelled. 'Chen Quan Ran, you rogue! I hate you to death!'

Chapter 3

A servant informed Madam that her grandson and his wife slept in the same chamber last night. Madam rewarded the servant, and she smiled throughout the morning meal.

In contrast Chen Quan Ran's heart was conflicted. Last night he planned to jest with Xiao Lan for a while, he didn't expect it would lead him to sleeping with Xiao Lan. But his strength didn't break the gentle Xiao Lan in bed as he was scared it would. He felt his wedding night with Xiao Lan was unforgettable.

Since Mo Lan woke up she was in a bad mood. If her eyes met Chen Quan Ran's eyes at the table then she would glare at him. She thought he was a repulsive rogue. She could forget he ate her easily, but she couldn't forget how he used an ink brush to write nonsense on her body. Earlier she bathed and wiped her body for a long time to erase the ink off her body.

Chen Quan Ran wasn't scared of Xiao Lan's deadly glare. He passed Xiao Lan a bowl of congee. 'Xiao Lan, you need to eat more to nourish your body. What if you are pregnant with the Chen household's next generation since last night?'

'Xiao Lan, listen to Quan Ran. It's too early to know if you are pregnant, but it's important to nourish your body,' Madam said.

'Madam, why are you jesting too? How can I be pregnant after one night?' Mo Lan asked.

'Xiao Lan, you don't need to worry. We will train together until you're pregnant,' Chan Quan Ran said and he laughed.

Chen Quan Ran knew a lot about childbearing, because in the past Chan Quan Ran had to help his men's wives give birth in remote villages if there was no midwife nearby. It helped him to know what pregnant wives needed to eat and drink to nourish their bodies.

The reason why Chen Quan Ran didn't want to face the truth in the past years that he had a wife at home was because each time he thought about his wife he remembered the weak little girl who sat inside the red

sedan chair. How could he consider a nine year old little girl as his wife? Xiao Lan was only a child ten years ago. Another reason he didn't want to return home years ago was because he couldn't accept his grandma forced him into an arranged marriage.

Chen Quan Ran always thought his wife didn't need to be from a powerful household, and his wife didn't need to be a beauty. He wanted his wife to be strong enough that when he was on the battlefield his wife would be happy and perform her duties at home.

Chen Quan Ran resented he was forced to marry a weak child bride. But his grandma raised him, and she had aged. Although he suspected his grandma wasn't ill, he wasn't heartless enough to continue opposing his grandma for another ten years. He was lucky Xiao Lan only looked weak on the outside, because on the inside Xiao Lan was strong. He respected the way she could manage his home whilst he was away for ten years.

Mo Lan blushed and she kicked Chen Quan Ran's leg under the table. 'Who wants to continue training with a rogue like you?'

Chen Quan Ran pretended Xiao Lan's kick hurt his leg. 'Ah! My wife, even though your husband has thick skin but you shouldn't kick your husband because it hurts. Today my wife taught me what people say about a woman's heart is like a needle in the ocean is true.'

(Equivalent to the proverb 'needle in a haystack' i.e. it's hard to understand a woman's heart.)

Mo Lan stopped kicking Chen Quan Ran under the table. She suspected it wasn't Chen Quan Ran who sat next to her at the table, because she couldn't believe a general would own a rogue's mouth.

Madam was happy Xiao Lan was lovingly hitting Quan Ran, and she saw adoration in Quan Ran's eyes.

Madam, Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan ate and laughed together for a long time.

‘Quan Ran, do you need to go see the emperor?’ Madam asked.

‘Yes, grandma. Before I left the army base camp I sent a messenger pigeon to the head of the imperial guards. I asked him to inform the emperor why I returned home. If I don’t go see the emperor today then the emperor will be impatient,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘Quan Ran, the emperor and you are childhood friends. But you didn’t even return to attend the emperor and the empress’ wedding banquet. Be careful when you enter the imperial palace, the emperor will give you a beating,’ Madam said.

Chen Quan Ran thought about how the emperor would pretend to want to behead him when he enters the imperial palace, and he laughed.

‘Grandma, you know that you, grandpa, my father and I helped keep the crown on the emperor’s head steady. We helped build the emperor’s Northern Empire, and we helped the emperor’s citizens to have peaceful lives. The emperor will think he can’t thank me fast enough. Why would he want to give me a beating?’

Madam frowned. ‘Quan Ran, you clearly don’t know big from small and you can’t see the sky from the ground. Don’t say those words for outsiders to hear. You and the emperor have a good friendship, but the distance between an emperor and his citizen needs to be respected. If you are found guilty of offending the emperor, it won’t matter how many good deeds you performed in the past because you’ll still be beheaded.’

‘Grandma, I know. Your grandson isn’t foolish. Even if someone else wanted me beheaded my head won’t fall easily,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran ate another bowl of congee, he drank tea and he wiped his mouth. He saw Xiao Lan was glaring at him and he smiled. ‘Xiao Lan, do you want to come with me to see the emperor?’

Mo Lan was worried about Chen Quan Ran leaving. She opened her mouth to say something, but she quickly closed her mouth.

After the morning meal, a servant helped Chen Quan Ran put on his official clothes to see the emperor in the imperial palace.

At the front gate of the Chen household, Mo Lan gave Chen Quan Ran a bag. 'You should bring this with you, it will help you inside the imperial palace.'

'Xiao Lan, what is this?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran opened the bag and inside were valuable jewellery.

'You haven't been to the imperial palace for years. I'm worried some people will not recognise you when you enter the imperial palace. Madam said you and the emperor are childhood friends, but that is in the past. Today is different, he is the emperor and you are his general. I'm worried inside the imperial palace there will be many court officials who will be jealous of you, and they will scheme against you. This is why...' Mo Lan said. She retied the bag for Chen Quan Ran. 'After you enter the imperial palace, you should give gifts to the eunuchs who serve the emperor, and they will remember you and be grateful toward you. If they hear any schemes against you then they will inform you about which court officials you should be weary of.'

Chen Quan Ran laughed. 'Xiao Lan, you want me to bribe people?'

'Bribe is a strong word to say. Inside the imperial palace are many imperial consorts related to court officials. If you don't walk carefully before returning home then you'll have many people who are waiting for an opportunity to harm you. There will be many greedy imperial guards who will open and close their eyes when they need to. That's why you need to be careful in case you fall into an unexpected trap...' Mo Lan said. She looked at Chen Quan Ran sternly. 'And the Chen household is rich. This bag of jewellery is nothing. Take it and quickly go before you are late to see the emperor.'

Chen Quan Ran's heart was moved. In the past he hated any kind of bribes. He was in a position where he didn't need to rely on court officials' support to keep his position. But Xiao Lan thought about his

safety and she planned ways to help him defend against court officials who would want to harm him, made his heart trembled.

Chen Quan Ran carried the bag and he smiled. 'Xiao Lan, are you worried about your husband's safety?'

Mo Lan blushed. 'Who wants to worry about you? I'm only worried about the future of the Chen household.'

'Xiao Lan, if you are worried about me then you can say you are worried about me. You don't need to use another excuse to hide that you are worried about me,' Chen Quan Ran said. He stepped closer to Xiao Lan. He held some of her hair strands and he lifted it to his nose. 'It's good, you smell like my wife.'

Mo Lan kicked Chen Quan Ran's leg. 'You rogue!'

Mo Lan turned around and she walked away from Chen Quan Ran. She heard a loud laughter behind her back. She didn't know how she married such a repulsive rogue.

Cheng cleaned her master and mistress' chamber. She accidentally knocked something concealed that hung on a wall.

'Mistress, what is this? Why is it heavy?' Cheng asked.

'Be careful! Don't open it,' Mo Lan warned.

Cheng stepped back from the fallen object. 'Mistress, what is under the black fabric? Is it one of master's treasures?'

Mo Lan looked at Chen Quan Ran's concealed dao (a Chinese sabre) and she smiled. 'Yes it can be considered as a treasure. It's a powerful treasure.'

Cheng was curious why her mistress was gently stroking the concealed object. 'Is it valuable?'

'It's an invaluable treasure. Xiao Cheng, help me hang it back on the wall. It's too heavy for me to lift it by myself,' Mo Lan said.

Mo Lan and Cheng took a long time to hang the dao back on the wall. There were sweat visible on their foreheads.

'Mistress, I think master hid gold under the fabric. Why would master need to hide so much gold?' Cheng asked.

'Xiao Cheng, your eyes need nourishment. It's something more valuable than gold,' Mo Lan said.

Mo Lan removed the fabric. Under the fabric was a long and broad dragon shaped dao. Mo Lan wasn't surprised Chen Quan Ran polished his precious dao often, candle light reflected off the shiny dao.

Cheng's hand stretched toward the dao, but Mo Lan stopped her. 'Xiao Cheng, don't touch it carelessly. This dao has its own powerful qi. If you're not careful, it can kill you.'

'Mistress, can it truly kill me? It looks like an ordinary dao,' Cheng said.

Mo Lan silently observed the dao. She didn't know kung fu, but she knew warriors always brought a weapon with them everywhere they travelled. She knew the dao in front of her was Chen Quan Ran's precious companion.

Long ago Madam told Mo Lan that Chen Quan Ran owned a powerful dao since he was a little boy and he never travelled anywhere without it. The longer Mo Lan looked at the dao the more she couldn't believe the dao's owner was her husband, because she heard sword masters say that a warrior's weapon reflected the strength of the warrior's core.

'Xiao Cheng, sword masters have said brandish the sabre like a tiger pouncing. Don't think because it looks like an ordinary dao, it doesn't have its own powerful qi. This dao can choose its owner. If this dao doesn't think its owner is deserving to brandish it then its inner qi will not be exploited,' Mo Lan said.

(Proverb means when a person wields a sabre the energy behind the sabre is as powerful as a tiger pouncing its prey.)

Chen Quan Ran stepped into his and Xiao Lan's chamber and he was pleased Xiao Lan understood his dao's inner strength. 'Xiao Lan, I didn't think a little young lady like you understood about the qi of weapons.'

Mo Lan and Cheng were surprised Chen Quan Ran returned home early from the imperial palace.

Cheng wanted to bow to formally greet her master, but he waved his hand. She understood her master wanted to be alone with her mistress and she left her master and mistress' chamber.

Chen Quan Ran picked up his dao and he sliced it in the air. He saw Xiao Lan was absorbed by the dao's melodic sounds and he laughed. 'Xiao Lan, do you know the name of my dao?'

Mo Lan heard Chen Quan Ran's laugh, she took her eyes off his dao and she looked at him. She couldn't believe he was standing in front of her, because she didn't know why he came home early, it was less than one shichen since he left to see the emperor.

'Long He Xue,' Mo Lan said.

(The name of Chen Quan Ran's dao means 'dragon drinks blood.')

Chen Quan Ran looked at Xiao Lan, and he gently stroked his precious dao like he was stroking Xiao Lan's soft skin. 'My precious dao on the battlefield has drank many of my enemies' blood.'

'I read a book about weapons that explained the legend of your dao. The legend is that your dao was once an evil black dragon demon who killed many living beings. A powerful deity defeated the black dragon and he trapped the black dragon's soul inside an ordinary dao. The deity buried the dao on top of a snowy mountain, and only fresh blood can summon the black dragon's soul. The legend warns if someone evil possesses the dao then it will become a slave to the dao. But if someone good

possesses the dao then the dao will acknowledge that person as its owner,' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran was shocked Xiao Lan knew about the origin of his dao. He felt blessed his grandma found a precious treasure to be his wife.

Mo Lan frowned. 'Why are you staring at me?'

Chen Quan Ran laughed. 'I didn't expect you knew about Long He Xue's origin. Grandma told me you are an exceptional scholar. I can see you are deserving of her praise.'

Mo Lan scoffed. 'Wasn't it you who looked down on scholars... it doesn't matter. Didn't you go see the emperor? Why are you home this soon?'

'I knew you were at home missing me. So I told the emperor my wife is at home waiting for me and I asked the emperor to speak fast. Then I flew home to be with you,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan blushed. 'You... why are you speaking nonsense?'

Chen Quan Ran spared Xiao Lan's shyness. He wielded his dao. 'Xiao Lan, do you want to see Long He Xue's true strength?'

Chen Quan Ran used the tip of his dao to prick his finger. His fresh red blood dripped down the tip of his dao.

Mo Lan opened her mouth to cry out, but she closed her mouth because Chen Quan Ran's dao changed from black to red. She was frightened the way his dao looked like an alive dragon who drank his blood.

Mo Lan thought Chen Quan Ran's eyes looked possessed by his dao. He smiled at her and suddenly he leapt from their chamber to the courtyard.

Mo Lan watched Chen Quan Ran thrust his dao at the flowers in the courtyard. His dao looked like it was flying and dancing and flower petals stained with his red blood fluttered onto the ground.

Xiao Ha and some of Chen Quan Ran's other men were drinking wine jars on the roof.

Xiao Ha was the first to notice the general was showing off Long He Xue in front of the general's wife and he laughed. 'What is the general doing? Long He Xue is his most precious weapon. All these years apart from during battle I have never once seen him unleash Long He Xue's strength to show off in front of someone.'

'Lieutenant Ha, can you not see the general's wife is standing in front of the door of their chamber. The general's wife is admiring the general's swordsmanship. Perhaps the general wants to show off Long He Xue in front of his wife to earn her adoration,' a warrior who sat on the right of Xiao Ha said.

'How can that be true? Doesn't the general hate weak and gentle young ladies like his wife the most?' a warrior who sat on the left of Xiao Ha said.

'You shouldn't underestimate the general's wife. She is young and little, but she isn't an ordinary lady. The general's strength is nothing compared to his wife's strength. Last night didn't you see the general's wife ambushed the general and she pulled him into their chamber?' a bold warrior said.

Xiao Ha and the warriors on the roof laughed loudly.

Mo Lan admired Chen Quan Ran's swift continuous movements. She thought his dao was powerful and beautiful. She felt it was like his body combined with his dao's soul into one powerful deity.

Mo Lan felt like a wind circled her heart and her heart would stop beating if she took her eyes off Chen Quan Ran. He was surrounded by a rain cloud of flower petals.

Mo Lan eyes felt blinded by the bright red light reflected off Chen Quan Ran's dao, and her heart overflowed with awe. She realised the rumours about his swordsmanship were true, and she understood why the citizens of the Northern Empire and his enemies would fear and respect

him. Her heart was also filled with pride, because the man in front of her was her husband, her sky and her everything.

Chen Quan Ran wanted to wield his dao for a longer time, but Xiao Lan pulled him into their chamber and she bandaged his finger.

‘If you want to wield your dao then wield your dao. You don’t need to cut your finger. Look at your finger, it’s still bleeding enough to scare a person,’ Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran stared at Xiao Lan’s eyelashes, the sweat beads on her little nose and her peony lips that was reprimanding him. He laughed and he leaned his face close to her face. ‘Xiao Lan, is your heart hurting for me?’

Mo Lan was used to Chen Quan Ran’s jests. She glared at him. ‘How can you jest? If you are not careful then the wound on your finger will leave a scary scar.’

‘This wound is nothing. On the battlefield my men and I have received many deep wounds. There are scars on my chest, arms and thighs... last night when we were training as husband and wife, didn’t you see my scars?’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan blushed. She couldn’t believe how thick skinned Chen Quan Ran was.

Chen Quan Ran loved to see Xiao Lan’s cheeks blush pink. ‘I can’t fault you for not seeing my scars, because last night there weren’t enough stars in the night sky. Perhaps tonight we shouldn’t blow out the candles in our chamber, and you can see the scars on your husband’s body.’

Xiao Lan squeezed Chen Quan Ran’s bandaged finger and he cried out. ‘Ah! Xiao Lan, do you want to kill your husband?’

‘Then your rogue mouth shouldn’t speak nonsense,’ Mo Lan said.

'I wasn't speaking nonsense. I hugged and kissed you all night. Your lips were sweet, but I didn't get to see your body clearly in the dark,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan's ears burned red. She kicked Chen Quan Ran's leg. 'You shallow rogue. If you don't want to be hit all night then don't speak nonsense,' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran captured Xiao Lan's soft hands. 'What shallow rogue? I'm a general who officially married you. I remembered eight bearers carried you in a sedan chair into the Chen household. You are my official wife. I can kiss your lips and touch you anywhere. I have the heavens' blessing to train with you on our bed day and night if I wanted to... come here my wife, let your husband kiss you... ah!'

Chen Quan Ran's lips almost touched Xiao Lan's soft lips, but she kicked his leg.

Chen Quan Ran hugged Xiao Lan and he kissed her for a while before they were interrupted by one of the emperor's messenger.

'General Chen, receive the emperor's edict,' a messenger said.

'The emperor's edict?' Mo Lan asked.

'Um,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran kissed Xiao Lan's cheek whilst she was distracted. He loved her reaction, her cheek was pinker than a cooked prawn.

Chen Quan Ran adjusted his clothes and hair. The smile on his face vanished. He parted the beaded curtains and he received the emperor's edict. Afterward the eunuchs carried large chests into the Chen manor, they formally bowed to him and they left the Chen manor.

'What is inside the chests?' Mo Lan asked.

Chen Quan Ran laughed. 'Xiao Lan, open them and you'll know.'

Mao Lan opened some of the chests. 'Did the emperor give you all this jewellery?'

'Um. In the morning when I entered the imperial palace I gave the jewellery you gave me to the emperor for him to give to his consorts. I told the emperor my wife personally selected those valuable jewellery for his consorts. The emperor wanted to give me jewellery for me to give to my wife in return,' Chen Quan Ran said.

'I didn't choose those jewellery for you to give to the emperor's consorts to please them, but to appease their relatives who are court officials-' Mo Lan said.

'Xiao Lan, you don't need to worry about the court officials or the emperor's consorts. They are all the emperor's people. Besides, if you want me to return these chests to the emperor it'll harm my reputation as the emperor's general,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan didn't expect giving Chen Quan Ran jewellery to appease the people who serve the emperor would result in the emperor giving Chen Quan Ran ten times the jewellery she gave Chen Quan Ran.

Mo Lan worried the imperial palace was a hidden heaven and hell. The emperor favoured Chen Quan Ran during a period of peace, but one day the emperor would feel Chen Quan Ran's army force was a threat and the emperor wouldn't hesitate to turn his back on Chen Quan Ran.

'Xiao Lan, come here. Is there any jewellery here that you like? They are all treasures from the imperial palace. I think the round pearls suit your creamy white skin,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran put a pearl necklace around Xiao Lan's neck, and he held a mirror for her.

'It's true the pearls suit my beautiful wife. I understand why people say 'if there is light in the soul, there will be beauty in the person and if there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the house,' I think they were talking about my beautiful wife,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan laughed at Chen Quan Ran's excessive praise. 'The emperor doesn't like allowing his citizens controlling army forces, but he knows he needs citizens like you to lead army forces and protect the Northern Empire.'

Chen Quan Ran brushed Xiao Lan's hair away from her forehead. 'The emperor knows who he can trust and can't trust. If the emperor is a fickle man who listens to false rumours, Xiao Li do you think I would help him protect the Northern Empire?'

Mo Lan looked into Chen Quan Ran's wise eyes. On the outside he looked like a brute, but on the inside his mind was sharp.

Mo Lan realised Chen Quan Ran grew up with the emperor and they overcame many traps inside the imperial palace together. Chen Quan Ran wouldn't obtain the position of a general if he relied on brute strength alone, he needed a sharp mind to outwit his enemies.

Mo Lan knew Chen Quan Ran was right, he had his own strategies and ways of dealing with corrupt court officials. She didn't need to worry about his safety inside the imperial palace, because he overcame many obstacles to be a general.

Chen Quan Ran whispered in Xiao Lan's ear. 'Your husband wants to say thank you to you. Under this sky apart from my grandma, Xiao Lan you are the second woman who truly worried about me.'

Chapter 4

In the morning Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha visited veteran warriors' homes.

Mo Lan supervised the maids and servants cooking and cleaning. Then she ate a morning meal and chatted with Madam in Madam's chamber.

Mo Lan left Madam's chamber and she unintentionally heard some of Chen Quan Ran's men talked about her and Chen Quan Ran's relationship.

‘Do you see? The general has only returned home for a few days but lady Chen sent love letters to the general saying how much she misses the general,’ the first warrior said.

The second warrior laughed. ‘It shows how attractive the general is. The general is heroic and handsome, of course he has many secret admirers. It is a pity lady Chen is stubborn, she saved all her affections for the general.’

‘I disagree. The general is brilliant and handsome. Lady Chen is ordinary. She doesn’t match the general,’ the first warrior said.

‘Listen to me, Chen Luo Du from the age of fifteen served the general. She is beautiful and from a military family. She excels at horse riding and archery,’ the second warrior said.

‘You’re right. The general likes women like lady Chen. Isn’t Madam a heroine like lady Chen? Perhaps one day the general will marry lady Chen and she’ll become part of the general’s household,’ the first warrior said.

Mo Lan felt like a boulder pressed against her chest and she couldn’t breathe.

‘But the general has an official wife. Everyone can see the general’s wife is beautiful and she is good at managing the Chen household,’ the first warrior said.

The second warrior shook his head. ‘It’s a pity the general’s wife is no one in the eyes of the general. Everyone has followed the general for many years and knows that the general hates weak and gentle women like his wife.’

‘That’s right. I remember once we were riding alongside the general and a rich court official’s daughter fell in love with the general at first sight. It’s a pity the general asked the young lady if she can ride a horse beside him and laugh. The young lady didn’t answer. Then he asked if she can drink wine jars with him and talk monkey nonsense. The young lady didn’t answer. Lastly he asked her if his legs and arms are itchy can she

sword fight with him. The young lady cried and ran away,' the second warrior said.

'You're right. The general's wife is similar to the rich court official's daughter,' the first warrior said.

'The general's wife is exactly like the rich court official's daughter. Doesn't everyone know that year the general married his wife, he gave her a frog and she fainted? The general's wife is a spoiled lady, how can she be regarded highly in the eyes of the general?' the second warrior said.

'Perhaps it's true the general refused to come home for ten years, because he wanted to avoid his wife. But that can't be right-' the first warrior said.

Chen Quan Ran's men talked and laughed but they were oblivious to Mo Lan who stood nearby and the sadness in her eyes.

Mo Lan walked away from Chen Quan Ran's men.

Chen Quan Ran's men's ears were trained to hear footsteps. They heard someone walk away from them. They turned around and they saw a glimpse of the general's wife's back. They regretted their careless words and they knew they would face the general's sword.

Mo Lan walked until she couldn't see Chen Quan Ran's men then she ran to her chamber. She wanted to avoid the truth, but she knew it was true Chen Quan Ran avoided her for ten years.

Mo Lan didn't want to think about how much Chen Quan Ran hated her.

There was no father or mother in Mo Lan's life. Since she turned nine, Madam raised her.

Mo Lan did her best to be a good mistress of the Chen household despite her struggles. She didn't complain or act impulsively, because

she knew in the world there was no one who loved her unconditionally and indulge her impulses.

When Mo Lan was a child she didn't know what it meant to be married. Back then she thought she belonged to the Chen household and she could rely on her husband and her husband would be her closest family member.

Mo Lan didn't expect the first day she entered the Chen household her husband would abandon her for a life in the army.

Mo Lan didn't believe in the last ten years Chen Quan Ran thought about her waiting for him to come home. If he did think about her, it would be that she was a burden and he could throw her away like he would throw away his unwanted clothes.

Mo Lan knew for a woman losing her beauty wasn't the most pitiful instead it was when a woman was in her spring prime and there was no one to appreciate her. At nineteen she had beauty and her husband would be attentive to her. But ten years later she knew her husband would lose interest in her and her existence to him would be useless.

Mo Lan felt the emptiness in her heart, as though she lost something important and she would never find it.

Mo Lan hadn't met Chen Luo Du. But she knew Chen Luo Du had the right to stand beside Chen Quan Ran. As for herself, she knew she couldn't bear the day Chen Quan Ran distanced himself from her and married the woman he loved.

Mo Lan clutched her hands together. When that day came she wouldn't accept Chen Quan Ran's charity. She wouldn't hesitate to leave him, she would give him back his freedom and she would find a new free life for herself.

Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha returned to the Chen manor after a hunting trip. They brought home many wild animals they hunted.

Chen Quan Ran sat on his horse and he handed the wild animals to some servants. 'Carry them to the kitchen. Tell the cooks to prepare dinner dishes using these fresh animals.'

The servants carried the wild animals to the kitchen.

Chen Quan Ran's horse kicked its hind legs and it neighed. He patted his horse's head. 'Xiao Lang, you were good when we were hunting. Now that we're home why are you restless?'

Chen Quan Ran jumped off Xiao Lang. He pulled the rein, Xiao Lang neighed and he knew Xiao Lang didn't want to go back to Xiao Lang's enclosure.

Xiao Ha followed the general to the stables. 'Xiao Lang is a war horse. He's used to wide pastures. It's likely in a short period he can't adjust to being a pampered horse in a smaller enclosure.'

Near the stables Madam walked with her staff in one hand and Xiao Lan supported her other arm.

Madam heard her grandson's horse neighed. 'Quan Ran, are you certain you didn't steal your horse? Since your horse arrived here, there hasn't been half a day of peace.'

Chen Quan Ran smiled and he walked toward Xiao Lan. 'Xiao Lang is my precious darling I raised for many years. He fought many battles with me against enemies. He saved me during dangerous situations. He has good intuition. If anyone tries to steal him, he will kick them to death.'

Mo Lan looked closely at Xiao Lang. 'It's hard to meet a rare treasure like this horse once every hundred years.'

'Xiao Lan, what do mean?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'If my guess is correct, judging from this horse's appearance he's from Western Quyu and he's a purebred ferghana horse. This horse is a strong and an enduring horse. He was born fearless, no wolf or lion can

scare him. On the battlefield his strength and prowess is no less than a human,' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran couldn't keep his eyes off Xiao Lan.

Mo Lan gently stroked Xiao Lang's forehead and muzzle. 'If this horse loses its freedom it'll be restless. I think he neighs continuously because he's not used to living at the Chen manor.'

Xiao Ha was in awe of the general's wife's knowledge about Xiao Lang's origins.

Madam saw pride in her grandson's eyes, he was proud to be Xiao Lan's husband. Her grandson was intelligent since he was a child and there were few people who he regarded highly. She felt her decision for Xiao Lan to marry her grandson was the right decision. She knew Xiao Lan was intelligent the moment she met Xiao Lan, and she thought Xiao Lan was the right woman to tame her grandson's arrogance and stubbornness.

'Xiao Lan, I didn't expect you read many different books. Each day I see a different side of you,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran misjudged Xiao Lan. On the outside Xiao Lan looked weak, but on the inside Xiao Lan was wise and she knew about different ways of life. He felt being with Xiao Lan wasn't a bore and she always made him curious to see the different aspects about her.

Chen Quan Ran thought Xiao Lan would be happy to hear his praise. He didn't expect her to be indifferent.

'I don't have any talented sides for General Chen to see. I'm only a weak young lady. I can't carry anything heavy on my shoulders and my hands can't wield a sword. If I'm not careful I can be unexpectedly killed. I faint at the sight of a frog. I'm no different from a useless young lady,' Mo Lan said.

Despite Chen Quan Ran's intelligence he didn't understand the meaning of Xiao Lan's words. He looked at his grandma for help, but his grandma smiled and she walked away.

'Xiao Lan, what do you mean?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Mo Lan glanced at Chen Quan Ran's confused face then she moved closer to Xiao Lang.

Chen Quan Ran wanted to stop his wife from touching the temperamental Xiao Lang, but unexpectedly Xiao Lang let his wife hug its neck. He didn't expect his wife who glanced coldly at him was smiling with Xiao Lang and she was whispering in Xiao Lang's ear.

Chen Quan Ran looked at Xiao Ha for help but Xiao Ha shrugged his shoulders.

Chen Quan Ran saw Xiao Lang shook its tail and rubbed its muzzle against Xiao Lan's cheek. Xiao Lan rubbed its neck and she laughed.

Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha felt like they witnessed a miracle. Apart from Chen Quan Ran, Xiao Lang didn't let anyone else touch it. They couldn't believe Xiao Lang let Chen Quan Ran's wife touch it and hug it.

'Xiao Lan, how did you calm Xiao Lang? Can Xiao Lang understand you?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Mo Lan hugged Xiao Lang's neck and she rubbed its muzzle. She turned to look at Chen Quan Ran and her smile disappeared. She spoke coldly. 'General Chen, did you not know in this world there are animals who can understand human speech?'

'Is that true? Xiao Lan, does that mean Xiao Lang can understand you? What did you say to Xiao Lang before?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'I said to Xiao Lang that he is a horse and he can see from a wider perspective. That he shouldn't learn from his master who only knows how to judge someone from their appearances or he'll become a frog sitting at the bottom of a well. I also said that he doesn't need to be on a

battlefield to show how strong and brave he is, because he can be strong and brave anywhere,' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran laughed and he walked toward Xiao Lan. 'Xiao Lan, are you saying Xiao Lang understood everything you said to him?'

Mo Lan nodded her head. 'Xiao Lang listened to me and he calmed down. General Chen, it shows compared to its master Xiao Lang is a lot more intelligent.'

Mo Lan rubbed Xiao Lang's muzzle and she whispered in his ear. Then she pulled the rein and he obediently followed her to the stables.

Chen Quan Ran saw his wife walked away from him and he frowned. 'Xiao Ha, what's wrong with my wife? This morning my wife was happy. Why is it I haven't seen her for a day and she turned into a porcupine that is shredding its spine-'

Chen Quan Ran's men who talked badly about his wife approached him and they interrupted his conversation with Xiao Ha.

'Heavens, general your wife heard us talking,' the first warrior said.

'What were you talking about?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran's men confessed what they said about his wife.

Chen Quan Ran looked at Xiao Ha and he smiled cryptically.

Mo Lan and Cheng travelled to the eastern markets of the imperial city.

Mo Lan and Cheng walked into the best fabric shop in the imperial city.

The shop owner saw the general's wife, his best customer walked into his shop. He walked toward the general's wife and he helped her select quality fabrics for the Chen household.

A group of corrupt imperial guards entered the fabric shop and they threatened the shop owner.

‘Shop owner, this month’s protection fee is three hundred silver coins. Today’s the last day for you to pay your protection fee. Hurry up and hand over the silver coins. If you don’t pay the protection fee then my brothers will be unhappy,’ the oldest corrupt imperial guard said.

Mo Lan and Cheng were shocked to see imperial guards blackmail the shop owner.

The other young ladies inside the shop quickly ran outside of the shop.

‘Gentlemen, last month the protection fee was one hundred silver coins. Why did the monthly protection fee suddenly increased to three hundred silver coins?’ the shop owner asked.

The oldest corrupt guard laughed. ‘Your shop is profitable. Three hundred silver coins is nothing. Even if you pay three thousand coins and you’ll still have silver coins left over.’

‘But... recently I bought new fabrics for the shop. I don’t have enough silver coins to give in a short period-’ the shop owner said.

‘Who are you fooling?’ the oldest corrupt guard asked.

Some corrupt imperial guards kicked a few stands and fabric rolls fell onto the ground.

Cheng moved back a few steps to avoid the fallen fabric rolls.

Mo Lan frowned. The imperial guards didn’t intimate her instead they made her angry. She laughed coldly. ‘If I’m not mistaken, judging from your uniforms you young gentlemen are imperial guards. When did the head of the imperial guards start allowing imperial guards to receive protection fees? Unless the head of the imperial guards started employing young turtle guards.’

The corrupt imperial guards saw a beautiful young lady in a pink dress. They salivated at the sight of her creamy white jade skin, peony lips, her luscious petite body and they liked her smooth voice. But they didn't understand why a beauty who they could subdue with one fist would dare to look at them with cold eyes.

The corrupt imperial guards laughed and they surrounded Mo Lan. Their eyes roamed her body from the top of her head to her dainty shoes.

'Young lady, do you know who we are? I suggest if you know what is good for you then you shouldn't interfere in someone else's business,' the oldest corrupt guard said.

Mo Lan dismissed the corrupt imperial guard's warning. Madam raised her to be someone who stood up for justice. She wasn't going to stand idle and watch the corrupt imperial guards take advantage of the shop owner. Because they had a duty to protect citizens of the Northern Empire instead they acted cowardly made her angrier.

Mo Lan glanced outside the shop and she saw Chen Quan Ran stood outside. Her apprehension to confront the corrupt imperial guards directly disappeared.

Mo Lan laughed coldly. 'I didn't think there were imperial guards who dared to threaten citizens inside the imperial city. But in front of me are laughable corrupt imperial guards. I can't believe the head imperial guard would allow such worms to spoil a soup broth. Don't you young gentlemen feel ashamed wearing your uniforms and threatening defenceless citizens?'

The corrupt imperial guards were used to dealing with submissive people. They weren't impressed by the young lady's provocation.

'Little demoness are you sick of living? Do you know who my brothers and I are? Apart from the emperor, our master has the highest status-' the oldest corrupt guard said.

'Who is your master? A master of worms?' Mo Lan asked.

'You brave little snake!' the oldest corrupt guard said.

Mo Lan lifted her chin and she swept her eyes over the repulsive men. 'Bravery isn't needed to speak to worms like you young gentlemen, only a sense of justice is enough.'

One of the corrupt imperial guards charged at Mo Lan and he grabbed her dress collar.

The other corrupt imperial guards saw a white shadow swept passed them. They heard the guard who grabbed Mo Lan's dress collar cried out in agony and his bones cracked because he was thrown outside of the shop.

The shocked corrupt imperial guards saw a tall handsome young gentleman dressed in white clothes and shoes embroidered with dragon claws. The young gentleman's obsidian eyes glared coldly at them.

Chen Quan Ran's messenger told him that his wife was seen at the eastern markets, but his wife didn't take any guards with her instead only Cheng accompanied his wife to the eastern markets.

Chen Quan Ran ordered some of his men to come with him to find his wife at the eastern markets. In a short time one of his guards reported they saw a commotion inside a fabric shop.

Chen Quan Ran rushed to the fabric shop and he saw a brave young lady confronting a group of corrupt imperial guards. He stood outside and he smiled because he found his wife who was still angry at him.

Chen Quan Ran was pleased he heard his wife stood up for justice and she reasoned with the corrupt imperial guards. But he didn't expect that one of the corrupt imperial guards dared to attack his defenceless wife. He leapt into the shop and he threw the lout who dared to attack his wife. He regretted the lout only broke back bones and didn't die.

Chen Quan Ran's men looked disdainfully at the corrupt imperial guard who laid on the ground outside the shop.

Cheng's anxiety lessened when she saw her master. She pulled her mistress' arm for her mistress to stand safely behind her master.

The corrupt imperial guards who were still standing pulled out their swords and they pointed their swords at Chen Quan Ran.

'Who are you? How dare you oppose Tu Lang's guards?' the oldest corrupt guard asked.

Chen Quan Ran laughed coldly. 'Tu Lang? His name sounds familiar. Is he in charge of some laughable guards?'

A corrupt imperial guard charged at Chen Quan Ran. 'You dare disrespect Tu Lang-'

Chen Quan Ran slapped the cheeks of the corrupt imperial guard who charged at him. The slapped guard fell on the ground, the guard's mouth bled and only mumbles were heard from the guard's mouth.

Chen Quan Ran signalled Xiao Ha and his other men to deal with the corrupt imperial guards. 'These louts are disgracing the reputation of the Northern Empire's guards. Take them back to the imperial city base camp and reward them with eighty whip lashes. If they dare to act disgracefully again then take care of them according to their crimes.'

Xiao Ha and the other warriors followed Chen Quan Ran's orders and they arrested the corrupt imperial guards.

The bystanders outside the shop didn't know Chen Quan Ran's identity but they thought he had a heroic aura.

Inside Cheng's heart she applauded her master's manly side.

Mo Lan couldn't believe the rogue she knew who stood in front of her could be stern and heroic like a general should be. She felt proud to be his wife and she felt safe beside him.

Chen Quan Ran turned around to face his wife and his cold eyes melted. He smiled at his wife. 'Xiao Lan, did what happened scare you?'

Mo Lan's heart made room for respect for her husband, but respect disappeared after she heard her husband's jest.

Chapter 5

Cheng returned to the Chen manor and Chen Quan Ran took Xiao Lan to the best inn in the imperial city.

Mo Lan took into consideration Chen Quan Ran saved her life so she talked courteously with him on the way to the inn.

Inside the inn Chen Quan Ran sat closely next to Xiao Lan at a table. He smiled and he whispered in her ear. 'Xiao Lan, you look like you are upset. Yesterday did you carelessly hear something that made you boil with jealousy?'

Mo Lan frowned. She didn't want to admit her jealousy but she didn't want to lie. Why wouldn't she be jealous? Chen Luo Du stood beside her husband for ten years and her husband liked young ladies like Chen Luo Du.

Mo Lan glanced at her arrogant husband who looked like he wanted a beating. She ignored him and she drank a sip of tea.

Chen Quan Ran knew his wife had thin skin and she wouldn't admit her jealousy. He loved to jest with his wife, but he didn't want her to continue to ignore him.

Chen Quan Ran thought about what happened at the fabric shop and he shivered. 'Xiao Lan, your bravery is big. If I didn't appear in time then how can a weak young lady like you defend against those louts? You would have been hurt.'

Chen Quan Ran loved his wife's sense of justice, but he didn't want his wife to be injured. He felt she needed to understand if she wanted to be a heroine, firstly she needed to be certain if she could defeat her opponents.

Chen Quan Ran thought about his wife's loveable soft skin being bruised by that lout and he regretted he didn't beat that lout to death.

'Do you think I'm a fool? At that time I saw you outside the shop. Why should I be scared of those worms? You wouldn't stand idle and let them hurt me,' Mo Lan said.

Mo Lan drank another sip of tea and she smiled at Chen Quan Ran. 'Did you learn anything from what happened? If you did then you would know a person can't rely on their strength alone, they need to think with their head. In the future you shouldn't underestimate someone weak as me.'

Chen Quan Ran laughed at his loveable wife. He couldn't believe she reprimanded him in a situation she knew she lost to him.

A fuwu yuan brought food to Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan's table.

Chen Quan Ran rubbed his chin. 'Xiao Lan, those louts said they're Tu Lang's guards. What kind of person is Tu Lang?'

Chen Quan Ran suspected Tu Lang was the man he wanted the emperor to execute.

'Customer, be careful not to speak his name otherwise someone can hear you and you'll be killed,' the fuwu yuan warned.

Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan looked at the fuwu yuan.

'You know who Tu Lang is?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'Of course I know. Everyone in the imperial city knows who Tu Lang is. His uncle is Tu Qing Min who is in charge of an army force. His cousin is Tu Fang Su who is the emperor's consort. He relies on his relatives' status and he does whatever he pleases in the imperial city and no one dares to oppose him. Tu Lang bought his position and his guards collect monthly protection fees from shop owners in the imperial city. If shop owners don't pay the monthly protection fees then their bodies will be beaten into a pitiful state,' the fuwu yuan whispered.

Mo Lan heard her husband snapped his fan.

‘What about the other court officials?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘How can the other court officials interfere? Tu Lang has two mountains to protect him. The emperor favours Tu Fang Su and she gave birth to three princes. Where is the justice? Tu Lang kills innocent people but he receives no retribution,’ the fuwu yuan said.

The fuwu yuan returned to the kitchen.

Chen Quan Ran drank a cup of tea. ‘I can’t believe the emperor blindly favours that kind of woman and allow her corrupt relatives to kill innocent people.’

Tu Lang entered the inn and he looked around the inn.

‘Officer Tu, what a privilege. Welcome to-’ a fuwu yuan greeted.

‘Stop speaking nonsense. Tell me, did you see a young gentleman in white clothes come in here with a young lady in a pink dress?’ Tu Lang said.

Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan exchanged a secret look.

‘Officer Tu, every day there are couples who are dressed in white and pink clothes. Who are you-’ a fuwu yuan said.

Tu Lang slapped the fuwu yuan. He turned around and he ordered his guards. ‘Go upstairs and find them for me!’

Twenty young guards charged upstairs and they saw Chen Quan Ran sat next to Mo Lan.

‘Officer Tu, this is the gentlemen who told his men to arrest your guards at the shop,’ the first guard said.

Chen Quan Ran ignored the guards and he drank from a wine jar.

‘Officer Tu, this is the gentleman who threw one of your guards outside a shop and injured the guard’s back,’ the second guard said.

One of Chen Quan Ran’s men secretly followed Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan as Chen Quan Ran requested. No one noticed him so he went to alert Xiao Ha and Chen Quan Ran’s other men about the situation at the inn.

Tu Lang walked toward Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan’s table. Tu Lang didn’t own an aura of an officer. He looked ordinary, short and plump.

Tu Lang heard some of his men were arrested and whipped. Tu Lang fumed and he wanted to know who dared to oppose him.

Tu Lang looked at Chen Quan Ran and he thought Chen Quan Ran looked like a strong warrior and he suspected Chen Quan Ran’s identity couldn’t be ordinary. But he reasoned he had nothing to fear, because his uncle and cousin were powerful people in the imperial city so he dismissed his suspicions.

Tu Lang slammed his hand on the table in front of Chen Quan Ran. ‘You are a brave little boy.’

Chen Quan Ran frowned, Tu Lang had no right to call him ‘little boy.’

Mo Lan looked closely at her husband. She silently sat next to him and she patiently waited for his instructions.

Mo Lan glanced at the unlucky Tu Lang who dared to offend her husband. But she recoiled at the way Tu Lang stared at her.

Mo Lan heard about Tu Lang. She knew he visited brothels every day and he had many wives. If Tu Lang liked a young lady’s looks then he used any dirty tactic to force the young lady to be one of his wives.

Tu Lang looked at Mo Lan for a long time and he thought her beauty surpassed all his wives. He smiled and he turned to look at Chen Quan Ran. ‘You injured and arrested my guards. It’s an unforgiveable

offence... but if you surrender the beautiful young lady sitting beside you to me for her to become my little wife, perhaps I'll-

Chen Quan Ran kicked Tu Lang's stomach. Tu Lang's body collided with a door and slumped to the ground.

The other customers in the inn thought Tu Lang deserved retribution for his bad deeds.

Tu Lang's guards were shocked. They looked at Tu Lang and they couldn't believe Chen Quan Ran injured Tu Lang enough for Tu Lang to vomit fresh blood.

'Do you know a man name Sun Can?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Tu Lang and his guards stayed silent.

Chen Quan Ran smiled coldly. 'Do you know him?'

'Yes... I know him,' Tu Lang said.

'How do you know him?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'He... used to be my servant,' Tu Lang said.

Chen Quan Ran laughed. Mo Lan shivered because she never heard him laugh that coldly before. Mo Lan felt his laugh compared to Dizang's (Chinese mythological ruler of the underworld equivalent to Greek mythological God Hades) laugh would be scarier.

'I finally found you,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran whistled and two of his men jumped down from the roof.

'Tie him up and take him to the imperial dungeon. He can stay there until his execution day is announced,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Tu Lang crawled away from Chen Quan Ran's men. 'You dare tie me up? Do you know who I am?'

Chen Quan Ran took out his seal and Tu Lang was shocked to see the word 'general' on the seal.

Tu Lang silently begged the heavens for mercy. He hated himself for forgetting General Chen returned to the imperial city a few days ago.

Sun Can lost his parents at the age of five.

After Sun Can's parents' death he was sold to the Tu household. He worked as a servant for the Tu household for many years. Tu Lang abused him during the years he served the Tu household. But he endured until adulthood. He got married and had a son.

Tu Lang ordered Sun Can to work in a far place then Tu Lang attempted to rape Sun Can's wife but Tu Lang failed. Sun Can's wife tried to take her son and escape. Tu Lang overpowered her, he strangled her to death and he killed Sun Can's five month old son too.

Sun Can returned to the Tu household and he saw his wife and son's dead bodies. He tried to kill Tu Lang to avenge his wife and son, but Tu Lang's guards hit him black and blue and they threw him out of the Tu household.

Sun Can crawled to the Chen household and he begged for refuge. Chen Quan Ran took Sun Can in to serve in his army base camp. Chen Quan Ran wasn't close to Sun Can but Sun Can died to save Chen Quan Ran's life. Before Sun Can died he told Chen Quan Ran about his wife and son and he asked Chen Quan Ran to avenge his wife and son's death.

After Chen Quan Ran returned home he wanted to fulfil his promise and avenge Sun Can's wife and son's death.

Mo Lan gritted her teeth whilst she listened to her husband talked about Sun Can's family. 'A vile person like Tu Lang deserves a painful death.'

Chen Quan Ran worried about his wife's strong sense of justice. 'Xiao Lan, you have a heart of a heroine.'

'I hope under this sky people like Tu Lang who don't live with a conscience will be killed using the lingchi method (death by a thousand cuts),' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran looked at his beautiful wife and he knew why men like Tu Lang coveted his wife. The thought of other men lusting after his wife made him worry and jealous.

'Xiao Lan, in the future you can't leave our home unless you take guards with you. You can't leave with only Cheng. Walking outside our home unprotected with your beautiful face will attract trouble. Now that I'm home as your husband I need to teach you what you need to do and what you shouldn't do. Don't think you can rely on your intelligence that you will always return home in one piece. You know this is a treacherous world. Bad people won't care if you have a husband and they won't spare you,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Xiao Ha arrived at the inn and he reported his investigation to Chen Quan Ran. 'General, I talked to Tu Lang's past victims. They told me if they reported Tu Lang's crimes his uncle Tu Qing Min will pay someone else to confess and be Tu Lang's substitute. General, you need evidence to convict Tu Lang otherwise Tu Lang will rely on Tu Qing Ming and consort Tu's influence over the emperor.'

Xiao Ha saw Chen Quan Ran's furious face and he sighed on the inside. 'General, it's pointless to be angry without evidence.'

Chen Quan Ran couldn't believe someone like Tu Qing Min abused a high position to harm others, blindly let relatives to do as they please and protected them unconditionally.

Chen Quan Ran visited Tu Qing Min. As he expected Tu Qing Min politely welcomed him and pretended to be an oblivious uncle.

'It's my fault. I spoiled my nephew and now he has gone astray,' Tu Qing Min said.

Chen Quan Ran couldn't bear to look at Tu Qing Ming's fake act as merely a concerned uncle instead of someone who lived blind to justice.

Chen Quan Ran went to see the emperor and his anger grew. He didn't expect the emperor would do nothing to rectify the injustices against innocent people.

'I'm aware of Tu Lang's crimes. But if I plan to punish him, Tu Qing Mu and my consort Tu will cry in front of me and beg me to spare Tu Lang's life. I can't risk losing the Tu household's military support over one man like Tu Lang,' the emperor said.

Chen Quan Ran returned home disheartened and angry. He couldn't stand idle and let Tu Qing Min continue to abuse military power at the expense of many lives.

Outside Mo Lan's husband's calligraphy room she heard Xiao Ha tried to calm her husband's anger. She understood why her husband would be angry. Tu Lang and Tu Qing Min were killing and hurting anyone to get what they wanted.

Mo Lan whispered a few orders to Cheng and Cheng left. Then Mo Lan stepped into her husband's calligraphy room.

Xiao Ha saw the general's wife and he smiled helplessly. 'Mistress-'

'Lieutenant, I asked the maids and servants to prepare an evening meal for you and General Chen's other men. You should go outside and eat something before the meal is cold,' Mo Lan said.

Xiao Ha's mind wasn't sharp as the general and the general's wife's minds, but he understood the young married couple wanted to speak privately and he quickly left the room.

Chen Quan Ran sat silent on a chair in front of the table and the other chairs he smashed.

Mo Lan smiled and she walked toward her angry husband. 'You can be angry but don't break everything in our home. You know how valuable each table in the Chen household is. Even one chair is at least two hundred silver ingots.'

Chen Quan Ran lifted his head and he silently glared at his wife.

'Did you eat yet? You can't be full on anger. What do you want to eat?' Mo Lan said.

'I'm not in the mood to eat,' Chen Quan Ran said.

'You can't starve yourself,' Mo Lan said.

Cheng knocked on the door. She brought in food and tea as her mistress requested. She put them on a table that wasn't broken and she left.

'I made the food myself. Shouldn't you try a bit of the food I cooked for you?' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran thought his wife's food smelt delicious, but he had no appetite to eat. 'I don't want to eat.'

Xiao Ha couldn't calm Chen Quan Ran's anger. But Chen Quan Ran heard his wife's voice soothing as a summer's breeze and his anger calmed.

'I promise you never tasted food like this before,' Mo Lan said.

Mo Lan lifted a pot lid. 'This is a complicated rice dish. I steamed white rice and black rice together with coucal meat (Chinese crow pheasant / cuckoo). Do you think it has a distinct scent?'

'Isn't it only a bowl of rice? Why do you need to be long winded?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'You can see even cooking rice needs careful planning,' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran scoffed. 'I knew you were scheming something.'

Chen Quan Ran surrendered and he picked up his wife's bowl of rice. He ate a mouthful of rice and he nodded his head. 'Um, it tastes delicious.'

‘Of course the rice is delicious. Taste the bowl of soup too, it’s delicious too,’ Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran listened to his wife and he quickly ate everything on the table. Then he drank a cup of tea his wife poured for him.

‘Are you still angry about Tu Lang?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘If he’s one of my men I would have taken care of him according to the law. I wouldn’t let him walk around free to commit more crimes,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘If you want to avenge Sun Can... there is a solution,’ Mo Lan said.

‘What solution?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Mo Lan whispered her solution in Chen Quan Ran’s ear.

‘Xiao Lan, that is a good solution,’ Chen Quan Ran praised.

Chen Quan Ran pulled his wife onto his lap and he kissed her lips.

Mo Lan let her husband kissed her for a while. Then she pushed his chest and she left the room embarrassed.

Three days later something unexpected happened in the imperial city, the day of Tu Lang’s execution arrived and his head finally separated from his body.

The Northern Empire’s citizens rejoiced and they lit fire crackers to celebrate the death of Tu Lang. Only Tu Qing Min and Tu Fang Su mourned Tu Lang’s death.

Chen Quan Ran avenged Sun Can’s wife and son’s death and he helped rid someone vile as Tu Lang.

‘General, I don’t understand why Tu Qing Min didn’t help find a substitute for his nephew like he did in the past,’ Xiao Ha said.

‘Xiao Ha, how can you understand?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran whispered Xiao Lan's plan in Xiao Ha's ear.

'General, what wise person thought of such a good plan?' Xiao Ha said.

In the imperial palace many court officials feared Tu Qing Min's power, but General Chen returned to the imperial city and many court officials favoured General Chen. The court officials pressured the emperor to uphold justice and execute Tu Lang for his crimes, because they didn't need to fear Tu Qing Min as long as they had General Chen's support.

Three days before Tu Lang's execution, Tu Qing Min worried about how to save his nephew and he didn't eat or drink. In his tired state one of his guards found a substitute for Tu Lang. He immediately signed the execution paper without reading the name of Tu Lang's substitute, which was 'Yu Liang.'

Chen Quan Ran sent one of his men into the Tu household and 'Yu Liang' turned into 'Tu Lang' on the execution paper.

Three days later Tu Qing Min found out his mistake too late. He couldn't believe he sentenced his own nephew to death.

'My Xiao Lan is the wise person who thought of the plan. She whispered in my ear a few words and she turned my dream into something true. It appears reading many different books is useful,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran felt blessed he married someone wise and who lived with a conscience. He regretted he didn't appreciate his wife earlier and he wasted ten years. In those ten years if he lived with his wife then they would share many beautiful memories together.

Xiao Ha looked at the general and he knew spring brought the look of love in the general's eyes through the general's wife.

Chapter 6

Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha merrily rode their horses back to the Chen Manor.

At the Chen Manor they received surprising news, an unexpected visitor had arrived at the Chen Manor. The visitor was a woman about between twenty-one and twenty-two years, she wore a blue uniform and had a haughty aura. Her black hair flowed freely behind her neck without ornaments, not even a hairpin.

Although she looked beautiful, between her eyelashes was the look of arrogance that most ordinary unwed women didn't possess. When she turned her head around, she smiled joyfully.

'Luo Yu?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'General Chen!' Chen Luo Yu greeted.

Chen Quan Ran and Chen Luo Yu smiled at each other. Although he was a married man and she was an unwed woman, they embraced each other and patted each other's backs like sworn brothers.

'General Chen, I missed you to death,' Chen Luo Yu said.

The woman was indeed Chen Luo Yu, a skilful soldier under General Chen's army. After they greeted each other, Chen Quan Ran asked Chen Luo Yu about the recent events at the army camp.

'White Tiger and Little Pig really missed big brother. Every day the chefs and peach wine makers prepare delicious braised wine meat waiting for General Chen to return,' Chen Luo Yu said. 'Also, last year while passing through Western Shanxi the two young boys who joined the army are very tall now. They are waiting for big brother to return to teach them sword fighting skills. Big brother, do you remember the group of children you rescued? They are reunited with their parents, and returned home...'

Chen Quan Ran felt a little restless listening to Chen Luo Yu talk fondly of army life, he realised he had stayed in the imperial city for a long

time. On the battlefield he could display his true abilities and reminiscing good memories made him want to return to the army camp.

Even Xiao Ha felt nostalgic and remembered how happy their lives were with the people at army camp.

Mo Lan walked into the courtyard with a tray of tea while the three sworn brothers were reminiscing about army life. When a servant informed Mo Lan that a woman named Chen Luo Yu arrived at the Chen Manor, Mo Lan's heart felt a little troubled.

But Mo Lan was the young mistress of the Chen Manor, she had to be hospitable toward all guests. A hundred rumors didn't compare to facing Chen Luo Lu in person. Chen Luo Lu, had a carefree aura and was friendly. Mo Lan heard long ago that Chen Luo Lu was the type of woman Chen Quan Ran liked. Mo Lan didn't doubt there would be feelings between Chen Quan Ran and Chen Luo Yu, after all the two of them have spent years together.

'Lady Chen, I have heard a lot about you from Quan Ran,' Mo Lan said. 'I have heard you are a beautiful and skilful soldier. Indeed your sacrifices and contribution to the Northern Empire is immense.'

Mo Lan's gentle praise and cups of tea were presented to the three sworn brothers. But Chen Luo Yu's smile disappeared the moment Mo Lan entered the courtyard.

Xiao Ha noticed the tension between the general's wife and Chen Luo Yu, he couldn't help but cough softly. Xiao Ha remembered clearly the incident when the general's wife overheard the general's men compare her to Chen Luo Yu. It caused the general to endure a silent cold war with the general's wife.

Xiao Ha didn't know how to process the situation in front of him. A moment ago the atmosphere was joyous then the two love rivals met. But... he didn't know who should be happy and who the real love rival was.

Chen Quan Ran heard Xiao Ha's cough and immediately understood.

If Xiao Ha didn't remind Chen Quan Ran, he would have forgotten not long ago his wife was jealous of Chen Luo Yu. Chen Quan Ran laughed softly at the thought of his wife being jealous. He pulled his wife next to him and introduced her to Chen Luo Yu.

'This is my wife, Mo Lan,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'But my grandma and I love to call her Xiao Lan. Don't underestimate her because of her young age, her intelligence is sharp.'

Chen Luo Yu frowned. Her eyes assessed Mo Lan, drank a sip of tea and smiled. 'I have heard General Chen really like strong women, but big brother's wife looks a little weak.'

Chen Luo Yu was a direct woman and often spoke without thinking deeply. Unlike most women, her bluntness was influenced from years of army life. In her eyes General Chen was a strong and handsome man who treated everyone under him equally. He was the ideal husband to many women. Although he had an official wife, his wife was weak. In the past he had spoken about wanting a strong wife who could be alongside him during battles. The contradiction to his desires made her confused why he would introduce his official wife that he neglected for ten years to her. She felt like something precious was taken from her and inwardly she laughed gloomily.

Mo Lan wasn't oblivious to the provocation visible in Chen Luo Yu's eyes. But Mo Lan wasn't angry and maintained a smile.

'Anyone would be envious of a strong woman like Lady Chen, including myself,' Mo Lan said. 'If Lady Chen won't refuse, you have travelled a thousand Li to be a guest at the Chen Manor and as the young mistress of the Chen Household of course I will welcome your stay.'

Mo Lan's emphasis on 'young mistress,' caused the provocation in Chen Luo Yu's eyes disappear.

Chen Quan Ran and Xiao Ha stood on the side and looked at each other while Chen Quan Ran's wife and Chen Luo Yu exchanged sparring words.

Xiao Ha winked a few times to let General Chen know the tension between General Chen's wife and Chen Luo Yu wouldn't be resolved easily.

Chen Quan Ran looked at Xiao Ha to say that Xiao Ha appeared to be enjoying a good performance, and berating Xiao Ha for not informing Luo Yu's visit earlier and caused his wife and Luo Yu to meet under tensed circumstances.

Xiao Ha protested with innocent eyes to say their unplanned meeting had nothing to do with Xiao Ha.

Xiao Ha looked away from General Chen and slowly enjoyed drinking tea.

Chen Quan Ran sighed, his mood wasn't bad. Tu Lang's situation was resolved and released the heavy boulder from his heart. It reminded him how blessed and undeserving he was to have an extraordinarily wise wife. He felt foolish for not appreciating his wife and wasted ten years. His heart shook, he pulled his wife closer to him and whispered in her ear. 'Sun Can's family was avenged because of my impressive wife.'

Mo Lan was sparring with Chen Luo Yu when Chen Quan Ran suddenly pulled her to him and made her ear turn bright red. Mo Lan thought Chen Quan Ran couldn't see the situation in front of his eyes and daringly behave intimate with her... she took out her anger by pinching his waist and glaring at him. 'There are others here, can't you behave?'

Chen Quan Ran smiled and appeared to look obedient. 'Yes of course, what my wife says is always reasonable and suits the situation. Let's slowly discuss it in bed together.'

Chen Quan Ran was busy for many days before finally having free time. He began to miss his wife's alluring soft body.

Although Chen Quan Ran whispered softly to his wife, Chen Luo Yu and Xiao Ha were highly trained in martial arts so it was hard for them not to hear Chen Quan Ran's whispers.

After Xiao Ha heard the general's whispers, he immediately wanted to flee. Xiao Ha couldn't believe the general could whisper about a husband desiring his wife in bed without blushing or gasping for air. Instead the general appeared nonchalant while whispering unsuitable desires in front of others.

Chen Quan Ran's whispers affected Chen Luo Yu differently, it made her face turn cold and discomfort in her heart. According to General Chen's taste in women, he hated women like Mo Lan. But she couldn't understand why he was being intimate with Mo Lan in front of others.

Chen Quan Ran, Xiao Ha and other soldiers took Chen Luo Yu sightseeing to many places in the imperial city.

They lived together for many years, which was why they were comfortable around one another. After a few days of sightseeing, the emperor summoned Chen Quan Ran to the palace to discuss important matters and Chen Luo Yu was forced to part with Chen Quan Ran.

The past few days Chen Luo Lu occasionally visited General Chen's grandma. But General Chen's grandma loved to meditate and Xiao Ha was assigned to protect Chen Quan Ran.

After Chen Quan Ran left for the palace, Chen Luo Yu felt restless. That afternoon she practiced sword fighting and overheard Mo Lan talking with a maid. Truthfully, she secretly assessed her love rival closely. Mo Lan appeared weak, but Mo Lan was strong on the inside. If Mo Lan wasn't a capable woman then everyone in the Chen Household wouldn't regard Mo Lan highly. But Chen Luo Lu didn't think Mo Lan was deserving of General Chen. What Chen Quan Ran needed was a woman who could fight, not a maternal woman to manage the Chen Manor.

Chen Luo Yu's eyes shone confidently.

'A young mistress is indeed busy day and night,' Chen Luo Yu said scornfully.

Cheng stood beside her mistress Mo Lan and clearly heard the scorn in Chen Luo Yu's voice. But Cheng was happy Mo Lan was finally reunited with General Chen and Mo Lan's years of waiting and hard work was acknowledged and rewarded. Cheng didn't expect Chen Luo Yu would suddenly appear and attempt to put discord between Mo Lan and General Chen. Chen Luo Yu shamelessly demanded General Chen's attention and asked General Chen to take Chen Luo Yu sightseeing all around the imperial city. If Chen Luo Yu was inside the Chen Manor, Chen Luo Yu purposely talked about army life with General Chen to exclude Mo Lan. Cheng felt it was unjust and disrespectful toward Mo Lan. But Mo Lan didn't complain to General Chen about Chen Luo Yu's behaviour and let Chen Luo Yu continue to treat Mo Lan badly.

'Lady Chen if you're free today why aren't you sightseeing?' Mo Lan asked.

'Today the emperor summoned General Chen to the palace, General Chen isn't free to go sightseeing with me,' Chen Luo Yu said and smiled. 'It's been tiring sightseeing with General Chen for the last few days. Today is a good opportunity for me to rest my legs a little.'

Mo Lan wasn't angry and smiled politely. 'Quan Ran treats all his men equally. It's rare for Lady Chen to visit the imperial city, of course he would take Lady Chen sightseeing.'

Chen Luo Yu heard Mo Lan's implied message that even if Quan Ran had brotherly affections toward Chen Luo Yu, Quan Ran was still Mo Lan's husband. Chen Luo Yu didn't want to admit defeat and retorted. 'But General Chen said after being away for ten years the imperial city has many changes. Like places where he played as a young boy feels different and distant to him than in the past.'

Chen Luo Yu smiled. 'The other day General Chen remembered he loved to eat tanghulu (Chinese candied fruit on bamboo skewers). Truthfully General Chen usually doesn't like to eat sweets. Big brother is selective and in the past it has always been me who cooked for General Chen. If I didn't cook food for him then he wouldn't even glance at the cooked food.'

Chen Luo Yu paused but kept smiling. 'Also, before General Chen sleeps he would read about war strategies and weapons. If he doesn't read them before he sleeps then he'll feel he lost something important and can't sleep. Although he's an adult, he's actually no different than a child.'

Mo Lan heard Chen Luo Yu's familiarity with Quan Ran like the palm of Chen Luo Yu's hand, it made Mo Lan's heart uncomfortable. But she refused to let Chen Luo Yu's words deflate her own self-worth.

'Honestly I'm feeling frustrated. What is the purpose of Lady Chen saying all this to me?' Mo Lan said.

Chen Quan Ran didn't expect Mo Lan to ask her directly and her complexion looked a little uneasy. She especially noticed Mo Lan's maid Cheng was looking at her in disdain. She was disappointed Mo Lan didn't react the way she expected and spoke bluntly. 'I'm only warning young mistress that I and General Chen have been together for many years, fighting together, eating together, laughing and riding side by side while hunting in Da Tao Huang.'

Chen Luo Yu continued provoking Mo Lan. 'General Chen and I share the same interests and dreams. Besides, General Chen highly praises my skills and said if he didn't have me in his army then he wouldn't know how many of his men would have been killed.'

'Ah, is that so?' Mo Lan asked calmly and laughed softly. 'If Quan Ran sees you as someone that special to him then when did he say he wanted Lady Chen to marry into the Chen Household as his second wife?'

Chen Luo Yu was surprised by Mo Lan's question and didn't know how to answer.

'Then let's assume Quan Ran wants to marry Lady Chen as his second wife,' Mo Lan said. 'Lady Chen have you thought about in the Chen Household, Quan Ran has an official wife? If Lady Chen enter the Chen Household then by status, I'm Quan Ran's official wife and you'll only be his second wife.'

Mo Lan continued to reason with Chen Luo Yu. 'The Northern Empire has its own laws and households have their own laws. Quan Ran's grandma's criteria for her grandson's wife is high. Lady Chen, you haven't entered the Chen Household but you're already acting haughty toward me. Is it because you're in a rush to claim the official wife status?'

Mo Lan dismissed Chen Luo Yu's pale complexion. 'If Quan Ran doesn't want to marry Lady Chen as his second wife as you assume then isn't it true that your current status is a soldier of the first rank in his army? Although he treats his men equally and sees them as his sworn brothers, his men sees me as General Chen's official wife.'

Mo Lan deduced from her preceding reasons. 'Then according to common sense Lady Chen, you don't have any rights to stand inside the Chen Household. Lady Chen, don't you feel that you have overstepped boundaries as someone who is merely one of Quan Ran's men?'

Mo Lan's words rendered Chen Luo Yu speechless, Chen Luo Yu could only stare silently at Mo Lan. Although Mo Lan had to tilt back to look up at her, Mo Lan's words were sharp and cornered her. It made her feel like she had indeed overstepped boundaries and had nowhere to defend herself. She realised Mo Lan wasn't only a beautiful little woman, but on the inside there was nothing fragile about Mo Lan and she had underestimated Mo Lan. She silently assessed Mo Lan and her frustrations increased tenfold.

Mo Lan felt her words were too harsh, Chen Luo Yu was only a young woman who wanted to pursue a man in their heart. Mo Lan admitted

that trait about Chen Luo Yu was admirable and wanted to soften her words. 'At least Lady Chen inside the Chen Household you're still an honoured guest.'

Mo Lan left with Cheng to let Chen Luo Yu reflect about Mo Lan's words. Chen Luo Yu began to understand why Quan Ran had feelings for Mo Lan. Chen Luo Yu couldn't judge Mo Lan based on Mo Lan's appearance, unless she was a fool. But she couldn't accept letting Quan Ran go easily after being with Quan Ran for many years.

Chen Quan Ran busily resolved the emperor's matters assigned to him in the palace for a few days.

Chen Quan Ran was happy he could finally be home to eat. The food in the palace was delicious, but there were too many protocols in the palace to eat freely.

Chen Quan Ran pitied the emperor who was always busy working to improve the livelihood of the Northern Empire's citizens and had little rest. Also, the emperor had to maintain an image and mannerisms fitting of an emperor. Chen Quan Ran agreed with the saying that not anyone can be an emperor. When Chen Quan Ran returned home he didn't get a chance to see his wife before Chen Luo Yu requested to talk to him.

While he was busy assisting the emperor, he would miss Xiao Lan's smile every three to five minutes. Before he entered the palace, as the head of the Chen Household he had to take Luo Yu sightseeing and couldn't spend time with his loving wife.

Chen Quan Ran knew Xiao Lan was unhappy about Luo Yu always shadowing him. But he purposely brought many of his men to follow him sightseeing with Luo Yu. He had wanted to take Xiao Lan too, but his little demoness didn't know how to ride a horse. When he held onto Xiao Lan on a horse, Xiao Lan was frightened enough for her complexion to pale.

Chen Quan Ran didn't want to force Xiao Lan to ride a horse, he also didn't want to disappoint his men who looked forward to sightseeing and was forced to leave Xiao Lan home for a few days. Besides, Luo Yu wasn't going to be staying long in the imperial city. In a few days he planned to order Luo Yu back to the army camp to prevent upsetting Xiao Lan.

Chen Quan Ran hadn't spoken to Luo Yu about her behaviour out of consideration they were friends for many years. He didn't think the moment he arrived home, Luo Yu would shadow him. He didn't want to admit it, but in that moment inside his heart was only hate toward Luo Yu that couldn't be easily expressed in words.

'General Chen, big brother you're finally back at the Chen Manor. In the last few days did everything go smoothly with the emperor?' Luo Yu said.

Chen Quan Ran could only look and answer coldly to Luo Yu's question asked in a happy tone.

'Ordinary, the emperor wanted to discuss army matters,' Chen Quan Ran said coldly. 'I explained how my men would approach those matters and talked about the difficulties of life in the army.'

Chen Luo Yu was happy to be beside General Chen and talk to him in the small courtyard. She would ask a question and he would answer. She knew he was a man who took his duties seriously. It made her more certain that she was the right woman to be beside him. He was a man who needed a woman that understood he prioritised a general's duties and could discuss army matters with him. Besides, his grandma was a famous heroine. She believed in his grandma's eyesight, and was certain his grandma wanted to find a heroic woman to be his companion for life.

Chen Luo Yu was absorbed in her thoughts for a while then she saw from a distance there was a white shadow approaching them. Her mind became lively, she was shoulder to shoulder with Chen Quan Ran so she pretended to twist her ankle and purposely fell onto his chest.

Chen Quan Ran reacted fast and held onto Chen Luo Yu to prevent her falling. From a distance it would have looked like he was hugging her.

‘Are you alright?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Luo Yu was satisfied and nodded.

‘I’m alright,’ Chen Luo Yu said. ‘I wasn’t careful and twisted my ankle. If I rest for a little while, my ankle will be alright. General Chen, big brother before you entered the palace you promised you would take me mountain climbing. Big brother, you’re free now, how about tomorrow we go mountain climbing together?’

Chen Quan Ran didn’t answer Luo Yu’s question before he heard a familiar soft voice interrupt.

‘Quan Ran, tomorrow I want to go to the temple and burn incense,’ Mo Lan said. ‘Are you coming with me?’

Mo Lan was the person wearing a white dress. Her eyes looked at the inappropriate closeness between her husband and Chen Luo Yu.

Chen Luo Yu smiled. ‘Young mistress, General Chen is someone who values keeping his promise. If big brother promised to take me mountain climbing, it’s not good to make him break his promise.’

Mo Lan ignored Chen Luo Yu’s presence. Mo Lan focused on her husband. ‘Tomorrow I want to go to the temple to burn incense, Quan Ran can you come with me?’

After Mo Lan asked Chen Quan Ran the same question, the intensity of her gaze increased. Chen Luo Yu was surprised by Mo Lan’s intense gaze and realised Mo Lan wasn’t an easy opponent.

Chen Quan Ran didn’t know what to do in the situation in front of him. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to answer, but he was too shocked by his wife’s intense gaze. The impression in his mind, Xiao Lan was a brilliant woman, gentle and alluring. He didn’t think there would be a day he

would see Xiao Lan's aura be more intimidating than his grandma's sharp aura. But because he didn't answer, it provoked Xiao Lan's anger.

'Chen Quan Ran, if you don't willingly come with me to the temple but rather go mountain climbing with Lady Chen then from this day onward you can spend your whole life with Lady Chen,' Mo Lan said.

Mo Lan laughed coldly. 'Because I'm your wife, I wanted to maintain your reputation. I easily forgave your coldness toward me many times. If I respect a person but that person can't respect me then I don't need the position of General Chen's wife.'

Mo Lan spoke in a firmer voice. 'You can say that I'm jealous or petty. After our wedding I waited for you for ten years. During that time I have performed my duties toward the Chen Household in a satisfactory manner. I, Mo Lan can say that I haven't done anything to wrong you.'

Mo Lan's voice remained decisive. 'After ten years you returned. If you still can't accept me, and feel that I, Mo Lan isn't compatible with General Chen and make it hard for you to marry your ideal woman then it's easier than you think. You can give me a divorce paper and I won't interfere with you marrying Lady Chen.'

Xiao Lan emphasised her last suggestion. Suddenly, Chen Quan Ran used all his strength to push Luo Yu off his chest.

Chen Luo Yu didn't think Chen Quan Ran would push her and in her unstable state she fell on the ground.

Chen Quan Ran and Chen Luo Yu were both shocked by Mo Lan's words.

Chen Quan Ran didn't steady his mind until a while later. After seeing his wife lose her usual composure and fiercely voicing her grievances, he wasn't even a little offended. Instead he felt a warm sense of happiness inside his head.

Chen Quan Ran felt his Xiao Lan cared about him, it made him happier than usual. He knew, his little demoness was always too calm. If Luo Yu

didn't shadow him then he wouldn't know how long his Xiao Lan would suppress her grievances.

'General Chen...' Chen Luo Yu called.

Chen Luo Yu felt General Chen's push was scarier than falling on the ground. She didn't understand why Mo Lan's words would cause him to treat her in that way.

Chen Quan Ran pulled Xiao Lan close to him with one hand and turned his head to face Luo Yu. 'I have a wife. You can see my wife loves vinegar. If you continue to shadow me in an unclear manner, my wife will certainly become very angry and I won't be able to control my wife.'

Chen Quan Ran briefly turned around to face his Xiao Lan, laughed softly and ignored the dreamy look in Xiao Lan's eyes. Then he turned to look directly at Luo Yu. 'You're a good woman, but in my heart there is someone else. The men in the Chen Household are loyal to the person they love. I only need Xiao Lan, she alone makes me busy enough. I'm afraid in the future I don't have free time to spend with you.'

Chen Luo Yu's expression was unpleasant and her lips trembled angrily. 'Big brother, in the past big brother said that you hate women like Mo Lan.'

Chen Quan Ran didn't deny Luo Yu's words and looked lovingly at his wife. 'That was before I got to really meet Xiao Lan. It wasn't until I returned to imperial city and lived together with Xiao Lan did I get to see how she brings me a different unexpected kind of happiness each day. It was impossible for me not to let go of my past foolish prejudice. Truthfully someone who looks little and weak like Xiao Lan can also cause someone else to love her.'

Chen Quan Ran turned around and laughed coldly. 'In contrast, about the situation before. Your skills to pretend you accidentally fell on me are a little lacking. Next time be certain your actions are more natural to prevent someone exposing you and feel that you have no pride left to face that person.'

Chen Luo Yu's face paled, she turned around and flew off angrily.

'I thought she actually twisted her ankle,' Mo Lan said. 'I didn't expect even her twisted ankle was fake.'

Chen Quan Ran stood motionless and sighed. But Xiao Lan fiercely kicked his leg.

'Quan Ran, can't you see you angered Lady Chen and made her run off?' Mo Lan asked.

'Ah, Xiao Lan can you be a little gentle?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran rubbed his leg and looked pitifully at Xiao Lan. 'If I didn't make her run off angry then wouldn't you be the one running off angry?'

Mo Lan's face was pink and green. She thought about how Chen Quan Ran made her angry and felt he deserved to be hit. She couldn't control herself and kicked him. 'Next time if the same situation happens then I won't need you to write me a divorce letter. I'll write a letter myself to leave you.'

'Leave me?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'Xiao Lan, how will you cope? Xiao Lan, isn't it you one who love me enough to let go of your elegant composure? If Xiao Lan actually leaves me, it'll be strange if you don't cry to death and cry yourself to life...'

Mo Lan heard Chen Quan Ran's teasing and became angrier. 'Who would cry to death over a rotten man like you? Quan Ran, don't run... you're not allowed to run... you need to let me kick you a few more times to relieve my anger otherwise this issue will be forever unresolved...'

'Good, we'll be together in bed forever,' Chen Quan Ran said.

'Chen Quan Ran, you're a scoundrel,' Mo Lan said.

Chapter 7

In the afternoon Chen Quan Ran visited his grandma in her chamber.

Chen Quan Ran's grandma requested him to sit next to her at a table and she put a hot bowl of herbal soup in front of him.

'This bowl of herbal soup is very nourishing,' Madam said. 'Drink it all quickly, you can't leave behind even one drop.'

For the first time Chen Quan Ran saw his grandma smile at him strangely. His intuition warned him there was something wrong with the bowl of herbal soup. The bowl of herbal soup looked delicious and fragrant, but he was too full from his afternoon meal to eat or drink anything else.

Madam's complexion darkened because her grandson refused to drink the soup and glared at her grandson. 'If I asked you to drink then drink. What are you doing staring at the soup? It's made with rare herbs that will nourish your body.'

'Grandma, if it's that nourishing then why aren't you drinking it?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Madam regretted she couldn't hit her grandson's head a few times for not being agreeable. 'Grandson, are you going to drink it or not?'

Chen Quan Ran laughed. 'Grandma, confess what is wrong with this bowl of soup? Why aren't you drinking it and forcing me to drink it?'

'Whose fault can it be but my exceptional granddaughter-in-law?' Madam asked. 'Every day if it's not in the morning then in the evening she would give me a bowl of herbal soup to drink. Honestly, I've drank enough to turn insane. One glance and I'll be full.'

Madam voiced her grievance and looked pitifully at her grandson. 'I don't know anything except that you must drink this bowl of herbal soup for me. Otherwise later if Xiao Lan sees I haven't drank it, she'll not let me escape.'

Madam heard her grandson laughed continuously, but she wasn't in a laughing mood. She forced him to hold the bowl. 'If you don't help me then I'll immediately order servants to evict you from the Chen Manor.'

'Must I drink it?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'Although it's one bowl of herbal soup, honestly I'm too full to drink...'

The beaded curtains parted the moment Madam forced Chen Quan Ran to drink a sip. It was the person who Madam feared, Mo Lan.

Mo Lan glared at her husband then she comfortably looked at Madam. 'He's healthy as an ox. If Madam force him to drink nourishing soup, do you think his body can cope?'

Mo Lan turned to look at Chen Quan Ran. 'Quan Ran, if Madam is being foolish why are you following her lead? Recently a physician said that Madam only eating vegetables has weakened her body a little, which is why I asked the cooks to make herbal soups to nourish Madam's body.'

Mo Lan continued to explain the seriousness of the situation. 'Although Madam has a strong body, but it's inevitable for an elder's health to slowly decline. If Madam doesn't nourish her body then during colder days, she could become severely ill. As Madam's grandson, you need to be more concern about her health.'

Chen Quan Ran couldn't say anything. His lips smiled behind the bowl of herbal soup, he couldn't drink it or put it down on the table. He felt very pitiful. He didn't want to drink it, his grandma was the one who forced him to drink it.

Madam felt she was pitiful too. Honestly, she didn't want to drink a sip of it. But looking at her granddaughter-in-law's stern expression, she didn't dare to protest. In the past she was a heroine and didn't expect one day she would fear a little girl.

Mo Lan snatched the bowl of herbal soup from her husband and passed it to Madam. 'Madam, why are you sitting still? Madam if you don't drink this then tomorrow I'll ask the cooks to double the herbal soup portion.'

Immediately Madam obediently drank the bowl of herbal soup.

After Madam drank all the soup, Mo Lan smiled gently at Madam. 'Madam, it's good that you drank it. In the future Madam isn't allowed to throw away or give the soup to someone else to drink when I'm not with you.'

Mo Lan looked at Chen Quan Ran. 'Also, Quan Ran next time Madam says a few pitiful words to you, you're not allowed to grant her request. Because you won't be helping her but you'll be causing her harm.'

Mo Lan picked up the empty bowl and walked outside Madam's chamber.

Chen Quan Ran felt no matter what he did, he couldn't win a person's affections. He didn't provoke anyone, but his grandma was upset with him and his wife was cold toward him. He admitted he was a gentleman who feared his wife. He accepted inside his home, his wife was the little chili. Although his wife scolded him, his heart was full of warmth.

Madam looked pitifully at her grandson. 'Indeed my granddaughter-in-law is exceptional.'

Chen Quan Ran smiled and nodded in agreement. 'Indeed exceptional, I love Xiao Lan's toughness.'

'I heard a few days ago because of Lady Chen, you did a few things that angered Xiao Lan,' Madam said.

Although Madam usually meditated by herself, she wasn't blind to what happens inside the Chen Manor. She was happy Xiao Lan didn't lose to a love rival and took pride in Xiao Lan's conduct. Xiao Lan reminded her of herself. She remembered about that year she protected her love.

'Isn't that right?' Madam asked. 'Because of Luo Yu, the last two days Xiao Lan caused your face to be unpleasant to look at. I heard you were banished to the calligraphy room.'

Chen Quan Ran would rather die than leave his and his wife's chamber. The past few days he crawled with his thick face onto their bed and begged his loving wife not be angry anymore. It resulted in countless bruises forming on his body. Luckily he could still sleep with his wife. If he didn't get to sleep with his wife then he would have been on the losing end... he would have been bruised in vain if he didn't get to sleep with his wife.

Madam saw her grandson's dreamy expression under a love trance and couldn't stop herself from teasing her grandson. 'When will I get to hold my first great-grandchild?'

Chen Quan Ran recognised his grandma wanted to trap him into a confession and purposely sighed. 'Hold a great-grandchild? It's something that depletes a lot of energy. Very tiring, needs a lot of energy to achieve...'

Madam chased her grandson to hit him. 'Little boy, what nonsense are you saying? You're a handsome wolf general. But you don't know small from big and dare to provoke your elder. See if I don't hit a grandson like you...'

Madam and Chen Quan Ran fought a while before Madam sweated excessively. Then Chen Quan Ran smiled and let her hit him once to appease her anger.

After they both sat at the table, Madam drank a sip of tea, smiled and spoke sternly. 'I heard the Southern Yue's Prince Jing Qi and the Southern Yue's General Fang Mu Chu wants to visit the Northern Empire.'

'Grandma, your news gathering is extraordinary fast,' Chen Quan Ran praised. 'It's only been a few days but the news has spread to you.'

Madam glared at her grandson. 'You are in the mood to jest? General Fang Mu Chu is an exceptional person. Remember when your father lost one battle? The person your father lost to was General Fang Mu Chu.'

The only territory that could oppose the Northern Empire was Southern Yue. The Southern Yue Emperor had seven sons and three daughters. The oldest son was Jing Li who was the crown prince, all the other princes except Jing Qi were living in remote areas. Jing Qi shared the same mother as Jing Li and Jing Qi was also the Southern Yue Emperor's favorite son. It was rumored the Southern Yue court officials didn't approve of Jing Qi's reckless arrogance, but Jing Qi was never punished for any serious offences committed. Because Jing Qi was the favorite prince and had another strong mountain to support him – General Fang Mu Chu. General Fang Mu Chu had conquered many territories for Southern Yue and earned the title of the undefeated general.

The Northern Empire and Southern Yue citizens all knew of General Chen in the North and General Fang in the South. Although there was a generation between the ages of the two generals, they were both known for winning many battles.

For many years Southern Yue wanted to conquer the Northern Empire, but hesitated because General Chen had his grandma's war knowledge, experience and support. In contrast the Northern Empire wanted to conquer Southern Yue, but General Fang was an enormous obstacle. As a result, Southern Yue and the Northern Empire were at a standstill.

Suddenly the Southern Yue Emperor sent his favorite son and General Fang to visit the Northern Empire under the guise as diplomats wanting to improve relations between Southern Yue and the Northern Empire. But no one in the Northern Empire was fooled by Southern Yue's truce offer, because it was clear Southern Yue had a hidden agenda.

'Although you haven't faced General Fang Mu Chu on the battlefield but since he has appeared, you need to know both your enemy and yourself,' Madam warned.

In relation to General Fang Mu Chu, Chen Quan Ran had never once underestimated General Fang Mu Chu's war skills.

‘I’ll silently follow their movements,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘If they use this visit as a ploy for an ambush, I’ll make certain even if they have wings, they won’t be able to use it to fly.’

In that moment Chen Quan Ran’s eyes shone dangerously. ‘Although my father lost on the battlefield to General Fang Mu Chu, it doesn’t mean that I’ll also lose to General Fang Mu Cu. If there is a day I need to face General Fang Mu Cu on the battlefield then I’ll use all my strengths to battle. When that day arrives, winning or losing will be clear.’

Mo Lan delegated duties to the maids and servants.

Most of the maids and servants were nearly thirty years old and they have been working in the Chen Household since they were young. They regarded General Chen’s wife highly.

‘This ladder needs to be repaired within three days,’ Mo Lan said. ‘Bring the ladder back after it’s repaired. Later this afternoon I’ll allocate five hundred silver taels between everyone to buy necessities for this month. Be certain that the silver taels are spent on the allocated necessities otherwise everyone will face the consequences together.’

The maids and servants nodded that they understood and quickly resumed their assigned work duties.

Suddenly some servants hurriedly carried mysterious chests into their young master and mistress’ chamber.

‘What’s inside these chests and why are they being brought here?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘Master asked us to carry these chests here,’ a servant said.

Mo Lan was surprised. She remembered the last few days her husband suddenly became busy and some days she didn’t see him. Even Xiao Ha didn’t know what her husband was busy doing. But every night her thick face husband would attach himself to her. No matter how many

times she kicked him, he wouldn't let go of her. Even if she cursed him, he would endure until he got to sleep with me. After being eaten by him, she didn't have energy left to ask him what he did during the day.

When Mo Lan wakes up in the morning, she wouldn't see the rogue anywhere either. She only saw him in the middle of the night when she was tired to death. She thought perhaps he went sightseeing with Chen Luo Yu, but Cheng informed her that Chen Luo Yu stayed inside the Chen Manor the last few days.

Mo Lan didn't know what was making her husband busy. While she was in deep thought, the servants brought more chests into the chamber and quietly left.

Cheng heard the commotion and ran to her mistress' chamber. She was curious what was inside the chests and opened a few chests. 'Heavens! There are many beautiful jewellery.'

Mo Lan saw the surprise look on Cheng's face and couldn't help but be curious, she stepped closer to the opened chests. Mo Lan was shocked to see the opened chests were full of valuable jewellery from pearl necklaces to jade bracelets. Mo Lan opened another chest and saw many different kinds of silk fabrics.

While Mo Lan and Cheng looked at each other in disbelief, they heard Chen Quan Ran's voice nearby.

'Is everything brought into the chamber?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Then Chen Quan Ran entered the chamber. He was satisfied to see all the chests he requested and smiled. 'Indeed the servants perform their duties efficiently.'

'Quan Ran why did you ask the servants to bring all these chests here?' Mo Lan asked.

'Of course it's to give to you,' Chen Quan Ran said.

'For me?' Mo Lan asked confusedly.

‘If it’s not for my wife, do you think the jewellery and silk fabrics are for me?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran laughed and strode toward Xiao Lan. A helpless Xiao Ha followed Chen Quan Ran into the chamber.

‘I heard the maids say that my wife likes wearing pearls, jade and silk fabrics,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘I also heard my wife loves eating seafood. So for the last few days I’ve been busy collecting all my wife’s favorite jewellery, fabrics and seafood.’

Chen Quan Ran pointed at the chests. ‘I’ve asked merchants from Eastern, Southern, Northern and Western territories to deliver everything here.’

‘Quan Ran... Quan Ran why did you collect all these things for?’ Mo Lan asked foolishly.

Chen Quan Ran panicked, turned around and looked at Xiao Ha. ‘Last time you and my other men told me something about tonight. What festival is taking place tonight?’

‘The Qixi Festival (Chinese Valentine’s Day, the day the weaver and cowherd meets on a bridge of magpies),’ Xiao Ha said.

‘That’s right,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Tonight is the Qixi Festival.’

Chen Quan Ran couldn’t be blamed for not being familiar with romantic festivals, he grew up in a military family and wasn’t interested in romantic festivals. If he didn’t hear his men talk about the Qixi Festival then in his life he wouldn’t know the Qixi Festival existed.

‘I heard a troublesome goddess descended from the heavens to earth,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Coincidentally a mortal young man saw her descend from the heavens, they fell in love and she became his wife.’

Chen Quan Ran remembered what his men told him. ‘But the goddess’ father didn’t approve of the marriage and ordered deities to bring her home. When the goddess was taken home she would cry day and night.’

Her father couldn't do anything except choose one day of the year she and her husband can meet. The Qixi Festival represents the day the goddess and her husband are allowed to meet. Many unwed ladies anticipate this day to receive a love confession from the man they loved.'

Chen Quan Ran smiled at Xiao Lan. 'While I was in the army I have never given my wife a gift. Let's not dwell on our past that I can't change. But now that I've returned, how can I let this night pass without celebrating the Qixi Festival with you.'

Chen Quan Ran lowered his voice. 'In these past few years I haven't given you anything during festivals like the Qixi Festival. That's why everything brought to our chamber today are gifts to you from me to compensate for the last ten years.'

Cheng and Xiao Ha felt helpless. They couldn't leave suddenly and didn't feel comfortable to stay and listen to General Chen love's confession to his wife.

Mo Lan's head felt a little dizzy. She didn't understand why her husband was busy preparing gifts for her the last few days. But in that moment there was warmth, happiness and gratefulness in her heart that couldn't be expressed.

'Xiao Lan, honestly I don't know what you like,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'But I believe there are bound to be something in these chests that you'll find pleasing. Even if you don't like anything, it's alright.'

Chen Quan Ran patted his chest and laughed. 'Because I can always pluck a red rose from our courtyard and give it to you myself.'

Mo Lan was deeply moved. Usually her husband had a rogue mouth, she didn't think because he would do so many lovely gestures to make her happy.

Mo Lan didn't care about what was inside the chests. What was important to her was the intentions inside her husband's heart. She had never celebrated the Qixi Festival with someone she loved before, it was the first time her husband did something to make her cry happy tears.

She thought about the ten years waiting to be with her husband on the night of the Qixi Festival made her throat choked and her eyes stung.

Chen Quan Ran saw Xiao Lan cried and quickly wiped her tears with his sleeve. 'Xiao Lan why are you crying? If you don't like anything here then you can tell me. It's alright, I can find things that you do like.'

Chen Quan Ran heard Xiao Lan cry louder and he panicked. 'Why can't my wife be good? Xiao Lan, usually your tongue is sharp and you'll pinch and kick me. Why is such a strong young woman crying impulsively?'

Xiao Ha could see General Chen's wife was moved and Cheng was speechless. Cheng didn't know if her master was actually foolish or pretending to be foolish.

Mo Lan half cried and half laughed. Tears flowed out of her eyes while she wanted to curse her husband. But she couldn't open her mouth to curse him, because Cheng and Xiao Ha were also inside the chamber.

When Mo Lan's eyes were too red she hugged her husband and wiped her tears and snot on his chest.

Chen Quan Ran smiled, he was happy his wife initiated a hug. He happily closed his eyes and accepted his wife's warm body. He didn't care Xiao Ha and Cheng were inside the chamber, he continued to hug his wife as a subtle signal for them to leave.

Cheng blushed and quickly left the chamber. Xiao Ha laughed and followed Cheng outside. Xiao Ha praised General Chen inside his heart, he didn't expect General Chen to be both impressive on the battlefield and the way General Chen pursued his wife.

Madam was happy to see her grandson and granddaughter-in-law exchanging loving looks to each other throughout the night of the Qixi Festival.

Madam grinned happily, she was certain she would hold her first great-grandchild soon.

The only person who was unhappy about the display of love between Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan was Chen Luo Yu. Chen Luo Yu would rather die than return to the army camp.

The following day Chen Quan Ran returned to the Chen Manor from an outing and was stopped at the courtyard by Chen Luo Yu.

‘In three days I want to leave the Chen Manor,’ Chen Luo Yu said.

Unexpectedly Chen Quan Ran still treated Chen Luo Yu as a sworn brother and patted her shoulder. ‘I’ll ask Li Dai to escort you.’

Chen Luo Yu heard Chen Quan Ran’s cold tone that didn’t want to keep her at the Chen Manor. ‘Big brother do you actually want to live with your wife for the rest of your life?’

‘Of course,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Xiao Lan and I are compatible. If I’m not with Xiao Lan then who else is there for me to be with for the rest of my life? I’ve neglected Xiao Lan for ten years. From now onward I will love Xiao Lan to compensate the years I wasted.’

Chen Quan Ran spoke from his heart. Like he told Chen Luo Yu before, he was a man from the Chen Household and would only love one person in his life, he loved Xiao Lan.

‘But big brother you’re a general of an army,’ Chen Luo Yu said. ‘In the Northern Empire, you’re under one person but above thousands of people. Can you be satisfied with only one wife?’

Chen Luo Yu’s thoughts were petty. ‘General Chen, for many years we have lived together. I don’t believe that big brother can’t see my feelings for you.’

Chen Luo Yu clenched her hands and bit her lips. ‘I... I don’t want a lot. Can’t I have a small status as your second wife?’

Chen Quan Ran would never agree to marry anyone but Xiao Lan. He shook his head and sighed. 'If you need to beg for love, isn't it pointless? You're a good person, ambitious and responsible. Why must you lower yourself to be a second wife?'

'I don't care,' Chen Luo Yu said.

'But I care,' Chen Quan Ran said firmly. 'If you become my second wife, I will have wronged three people. The first person I would have wronged is Xiao Lan who's been faithful to me for ten years.'

Chen Quan Ran spoke firmer. 'I'm someone who is ignorant when it comes to love. But I do you know and you know too that each person only has one heart. If a person truly loves someone then they shouldn't cut their heart into many parts. If they do, then it wouldn't be fair to anyone.'

Chen Quan Ran continued to explain his reasons. 'Xiao Lan has married me for many years and has never resented me. She has only managed the Chen Household and taken care of my grandma on my behalf. I love Xiao Lan and also grateful to Xiao Lan. I truly believe in this world there wouldn't a woman who I would love like the way I love Xiao Lan.'

Chen Quan Ran wanted his firm words to stop Chen Luo Yu from having false hope toward him.

'You should have your own happiness,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'From now onward you shouldn't waste your time on me. I can never give you happiness because I'm a married man who loves his wife.'

Chen Quan Ran didn't give Chen Luo Yu a chance to respond and left her standing in the courtyard.

Chen Luo Yu stood motionless and her tears flowed onto the ground.

Xiao Ha had been silently standing nearby and witnessed what had happened. He passed a handkerchief to Chen Luo Yu. 'General Chen has explained to you clearly. You shouldn't hurt yourself by being stubborn.'

Chen Luo Yu couldn't accept the situation. She took Xiao Ha's handkerchief and wiped her tears.

'You should end your feelings,' Xiao Ha advised. 'General Chen can never return your love. In the past he has always said to you that he only sees you as a sworn brother.'

'But I'm a woman,' Chen Luo Yu said. 'I don't want to be sworn brothers with him. Although Mo Lan is more beautiful than I am, what can General Chen possibly see in her to love her?'

'Are you speaking honestly from your heart or are you deluding yourself?' Xiao Ha asked and shook his head. 'We both know General Chen hates gentle bred young ladies who are haughty. If General Chen's wife wasn't someone who had exceptional traits to attract him then he wouldn't fall in love with her. I believe if General Chen's wife wasn't someone exceptional then you would easily be able to see her weaknesses. Xiao Yu, wake up, from the past to now you have never existed in General Chen's heart.'

Xiao Ha's words were heartless but Chen Luo Yu couldn't accept the truth that Chen Quan Ran from the beginning to the end had never loved her.

Chapter 8

Three days later Chen Luo Yu left the Chen Manor.

But Chen Luo Yu didn't return to the army camp, she decided to visit some of her friends and relatives from her father's side.

Chen Luo Yu didn't want to leave the imperial city because she hoped that one day Chen Quan Ran would change his mind. She would willingly be his second wife.

Chen Quan Ran didn't care if Chen Luo Yu wanted to stay in the imperial city, Chen Luo Yu could visit anyone as long as she left the Chen Manor.

After Chen Luo Yu left, Chen Quan Ran sighed softly and hugged his wife. 'Xiao Lan you should be happy that you don't need to be jealous of Chen Luo Yu.'

'Who's jealous?' Mo Lan asked. 'Which of your eyes saw me jealous?'

'You didn't eat vinegar?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'Who was the one who pinched and kicked their husband? Xiao Lan, can't you see the bruises on my arms are still visible?'

Mo Lan couldn't refute her husband's words. Although her husband insisted on sleeping with her when she was angry at him, she was glad her husband didn't hesitate to let Chen Luo Yu leave the Chen Manor.

Madam's grandson and her granddaughter-in-law returned to their affectionate bickering ways and she couldn't stop herself from teasing them.

While everyone at the Chen Manor anticipated General Chen's wife being pregnant, the Southern Yue's Prince Jing Qi and General Fang Mu Chu arrived at the imperial city and entered the palace.

Prince Jing Qi and General Fan Mu Chu were treated as guests at the palace and they brought gifts for the Northern Empire's emperor. The emperor diplomatically prepared a banquet to welcome the guests and summoned all his court officials to attend the banquet.

After the emperor, in the Northern Empire Chen Quan Ran held the highest status and couldn't refuse attending the banquet.

Chen Quan Ran was someone who was lazy to attend formal social gatherings, but he was curious to meet General Fang Mu Chu. So Chen Quan Ran wore formal clothes and brought Xiao Lan to attend the banquet at the palace.

It was Mo Lan's first time entering the palace and naturally she felt nervous. Although the Chen Manor was close to the palace, but her husband had been in the army for many years and she rarely had opportunities to enter the palace.

At the palace banquet hall Mo Lan had the opportunity to meet many court officials and see the emperor's appearance clearly. The Northern Empire's emperor Long Hao was twenty-eight years old, he looked like a young handsome gentleman.

Mo Lan wasn't foolish, although Long Hao looked gentler compared to her husband she knew to survive in the palace Long Hao would have won many battles within the palace to become the emperor and he wasn't a simpleton.

Long Hao was a wise emperor. On the outside he appeared gentle but on the inside he would make certain situations were controlled within his hands.

Long Hao had many consorts, sons and daughters. Mo Lan couldn't control her heart from pitying Long Han's consorts. Marrying an emperor was actually an unfortunate fate, because there were many women fighting for the emperor's affections. Also the women were forced to use their children to earn the emperor's favour.

Chen Quan Ran's intuition could see his wife's heart. He held her hand and spoke softly. 'Xiao Lan don't worry, in this lifetime I'm only marrying you. There'll never be a woman who would come between us. Apart from our children, there would never be another child that will call me father.'

Mo Lan's small face turned red and she used her strength to pinch her husband's hand underneath the table. 'Quan Ran what nonsense are you saying?'

'It's not nonsense, I was only speaking the truth,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Chen Quan Ran looked like he was making a blood oath and it made his wife smile.

Chen Quan Ran smiled at his wife then he pointed his chin at the emperor and frowned. 'Did you see? Don't think that our family's emperor is happy to have many wives and children. The truth is he has many pitiful reasons.'

Mo Lan thought wars between women were scary, especially wars between women in the palace. 'What are you saying our family's emperor? The emperor belongs to everyone in the Northern Empire.'

'Xiao Lan you are right, the emperor isn't a member of our family, only you are a member of our family,' Chen Quan Ran teased.

Chen Quan Ran laughed shamelessly and Mo Lan felt he was someone who couldn't stop from jesting every three sentences.

Mo Lan glared at her husband. She used her strength to kick his leg and drank tea like nothing happened.

Chen Quan Ran frowned. He rubbed the leg his wife kicked and protested. 'Xiao Lan you're torturing your husband.'

'What's going to happen if I torture my husband?' Mo Lan asked.

Chen Quan Ran smiled like a rogue. 'I'm willing to let you torture me in bed.'

'Quan Ran...' Mo Lan said.

'Xiao Lan don't be angry,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'Everyone is looking at us.'

Mo Lan didn't intend to look like she was exchanging loving looks with her husband to gain everyone's attention. Her face turned bright red and glared at her husband who always love to tease her. She couldn't believe he would dare to tease her in front of the emperor's eyes.

Luckily the emperor wasn't angry. The emperor laughed softly at Mo Lan like an older brother would laugh with a sibling.

Unexpectedly everyone's eyes gleamed teasingly at Mo Lan and her husband. Especially Prince Jing Qi who looked between twenty-four and twenty-five years old. Jing Qi was handsome but he wasn't as handsome as her husband.

Jing Qi was half smiling while he assessed Mo Lan. In his eyes were dishonorable intentions toward her. When her eyes met his, he stared inappropriately at her.

'General Chen is a blessed man,' Jing Qi said. 'You married a beautiful jade flower causing everyone to be envious of you.'

Mo Lan heard Prince Jing Qi's demeaning tone and she looked coldly at him. She immediately disliked the Southern Yue's arrogant prince.

Chen Quan Ran's teasing mood disappeared and his handsome face turned cold.

Chen Quan Ran smiled coldly at Jing Qi. 'The women in the Northern Empire are all beautiful. Prince Jing Qi if you're envious of me then are you saying that there isn't at least one beautiful woman in Southern Yue?'

Jing Qi's face darkened. 'General Chen's words makes it hard for anyone to carelessly nod their head in agreement. Southern Yue's power is on par with the Northern Empire, of course all the women in Southern Yue are beautiful.'

'Are you saying that Southern Yue men need to rely on women for power?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

The court officials secretly laughed at the Southern Yue Emperor's beloved Prince Jing Qi who couldn't compare to the Northern Empire's General Chen.

Jing Qi wasn't scared of the sky or the ground but he was scared of Fang Mu Chu who coughed and warned him to close his mouth.

Fang Mu Chu didn't look older than forty years old, he was tall, strong and handsome in his blue clothes.

Fang Mu Chu assessed Chen Quan Ran. Fang Mu Chu didn't know if he should praise Chen Quan Ran's masculine aura.

Mo Lan pulled Chen Quan Ran's sleeve under the table, gestured at Fang Mu Chu and she spoke softly. 'Husband, that man looks like an exceptional person.'

'Of course, General Fang Mu Chu is the best general in Southern Yue,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'If Southern Yue didn't have him then the Northern Empire would have invaded and conquered Southern Yue long ago.'

'I see why Jing Qi is scared to offend General Fang Mu Chu,' Mo Lan said. 'General Fang Mu Chu is someone who would leave a deep first impression on anyone.'

Chen Quan Ran glared at his wife. 'Don't you think your husband is impressive too?'

Mo Lan blushed. 'It's not the same.'

'Why isn't it the same?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran knew he was being childish, but he hated hearing his wife praise another man in front of him.

'I don't know how to explain it precisely,' Mo Lan said. 'One glance and it's clear he's not an ordinary person. But he's good at hiding his true strengths in front of other people and at the same time declaring he isn't someone other people should dare offend.'

Chen Quan Ran laughed coldly and he caught his wife's hand under the table. 'Wife, you're right. I'm not someone you should provoke so remember you're not allowed to think too much about other men otherwise I won't spare you.'

‘Quan Ran, what nonsense are you saying?’ Mo Lan asked.

Fang Mu Chu was amused by the young husband and wife affectionately fighting with each other and ignoring everyone else around them.

Fang Mu Chu didn’t want to admit the young Chen Quan Ran’s battle strategies and fighting skills were on par with him.

Fang Mu Chu assessed Chen Quan Ran’s wife. She wore a white dress and gave him a familiar feeling. He had seen many beautiful women, but he didn’t know why Chen Quan Ran’s wife made him feel like she was someone close to him.

During the banquet everyone were in their own deep thoughts.

The dancers and singers livened the banquet hall. But Chen Quan Ran didn’t care about the dancers and singers. He only wanted the banquet to end so he could take his loving wife home and sleep with her.

‘Why don’t our two kingdoms amuse ourselves?’ Jing Qi asked. ‘The two kingdoms can make a wager. The losing kingdom will forfeit something of a high value.’

The court officials looked confusedly at each other. They didn’t know what the purpose of Prince Jing Qi’s suggestion was.

The emperor frowned. ‘Prince Jing Qi, have you thought of a good wager?’

‘I can’t say it’s a good wager,’ Jing Qi said. ‘But it’s not a bad wager. Your majesty knows there is a territory between the Northern Empire and Southern Yue called Cai Ning. Although it’s closer to the Northern Empire’s boarder, many Southern Yue’s merchants travel there for trading. To avoid conflict between the Northern Empire and Southern Yue, if Southern Yue wins the wager then I hope your majesty will agree to forfeit Cai Ning to Southern Yue.’

The emperor thought it would be robbery in clear daylight. Cai Ning was a flourishing territory.

Although the Northern Empire and Southern Yue appeared to be harmonious kingdoms for the past twenty years, both kingdoms were waiting for the best opportunity to invade the other kingdom.

‘Quan Ran, where is Cai Ning?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘It’s located in the middle of the Northern Empire and Southern Yue,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘It has wide mountains and a suitable location as a base for an army camp. It’s known that Cai Ning is a territory claimed by the Northern Empire but Southern Yue covets Cai Ning.’

‘How can Prince Jing Qi have such a thick face and expect the Northern Empire to wager Cai Ning?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘It’s not the first or second day Southern Yue wants to invade the Northern Empire and claiming Cai Ning is a good step toward invasion,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘What is the Northern Empire going to do if it loses the wager?’ Mo Lan asked.

Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan exchanged a concerned look with each other.

‘Prince Jing Qi suggested a good wager,’ the emperor said. ‘But if Southern Yue loses, what will it forfeit?’

‘If Southern Yue loses,’ Jing Qi said. ‘I’ll order all Southern Yue’s soldiers to leave Cai Ning.’

‘That is an appealing wager,’ the emperor said. ‘Prince Jing Qi, what is the wager?’

‘It’s better to battle with words than with fists,’ Jing Qi said. ‘I’ll ask someone to recite three riddles from Southern Yue. If someone from the

Northern Empire answers the riddles correctly then Southern Yue loses the wager. But if no one from the Northern Empire can answer the riddles correctly than the Northern Empire loses.'

'Alright, Prince Jing Qi you can ask someone to recite the riddles,' the emperor said.

'Your majesty is indeed courageous,' Jing Qi praised.

Jing Qi called Tong Wen to recite the riddles. Tong Wen looked like a twenty-year-old man.

'Tong Wen, is a young scholar from Southern Yue,' Jing Qi said.

'The first riddle is,' Tong Wen said. 'Something that is easily done, I and anyone else can do it, one person can easily do it but two people can't do it exactly the same. What is that something?'

The court officials were puzzled by Tong Wen's riddle. Even Chen Quan Ran rubbed his chin to think deeply about the riddle.

Jing Qi felt triumphant everyone from the Northern Empire were puzzled. But Fang Mu Chu didn't care about the outcome, he savored the Northern Empire's good vintage wine.

Mo Lan tilted her head left and right, she thought the riddle was amusing.

Chen Quan Ran pulled his wife's hand under the table and he spoke softly. 'The riddle is a little puzzling.'

Mo Lan scoffed. 'It's only a little riddle.'

'Xiao Lan, you know the answer?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran knew his wife didn't want to look like she was boasting her intelligence in front of the court officials. But he stood and pulled her up too. 'Xiao Lan, tell him what that something is.'

Chen Quan Ran's sudden declaration startled everyone one. Even Fang Mu Chu raised his head to look at Mo Lan.

Mo Lan silently gave Chen Quan Ran a what-are-you-doing?-I'm-a-woman look.

Chen Quan Ran silently gave Mo Lan a it-doesn't-matter-if-you're-a-woman-the-Northern-Empire-needs-to-win look.

Mo Lan sighed helplessly. 'That something is dream.'

The court officials agreed Mo Lan's answer was logical while Tong Wen was amazed a woman from the Northern Empire could easily answer the riddle correctly.

Jing Qi was too shocked and forgot to drink the cup of wine he was holding.

Fang Mu Chu looked closer at the beautiful little demoness. The more he looked at her, the more familiar she looked.

Chen Quan Ran was proud of his intelligent wife.

'The second riddle is,' Tong Wen said. 'What is something that one person can only use their left hand to hold?'

'That something is the right hand,' Mo Lan said.

'The third riddle is,' Tong Wen said. 'There is something beautiful that is everywhere but no one wants to be covered by it all day and night. What is it?'

'Water,' Mo Lan said.

Tong Wen looked apologetically at Jing Qi who was frowning. Jing Qi couldn't believe a woman could answer all of Tong Wen's difficult riddles.

'I've answered the riddles correctly,' Mo Lan said. 'As a friendly gesture, I want to ask some riddles too.'

Tong Wen nodded his head because he wanted to restore his pride.

‘The first riddle is,’ Mo Lan asked. ‘In this world what is something that changes the fastest? The second riddle is, in this world what something is the spiciest? The third riddle is, in this world what something is the sweetest? The fourth riddle is, in this world what something is the strongest?’

Everyone were thinking deeply about Mo Lan’s riddles. Except Fang Mu Chu who was staring too long at Mo Lan and he noticed Chen Quan Ran’s was glaring at him as a warning to stop staring at Mo Lan.

No one from either kingdom could answer Mo Lan’s riddles.

‘A person’s heart changes the fastest,’ Mo Lan said. ‘An enemy’s heart is the spiciest. Friendship can be both the sweetest and the strongest.’

‘Mo Lan answered all the riddles correctly,’ the emperor said. ‘But no one could answer Mo Lan’s riddles correctly. It appears Southern Yue needs to perform their promise and withdraw all Southern Yue’s soldiers from Cai Ning.’

Jing Qi couldn’t refute the emperor’s words and agreed Southern Yue lost the wager.

Fang Mu Chu from the start to the end didn’t care about the wager. His eyes couldn’t stop lingering on Mo Lan.

That day Mo Lan’s wisdom spread throughout the Northern Empire. Chen Quan Ran’s grandma was the person who was the happiness to hear how impressive Mo Lan was.

‘My grandson is lucky to have Xiao Lan as his wife,’ Madam said. ‘If Xiao Lan was another man’s wife even I would regret it to death. My eyesight that year was right. Xiao Lan reminds me of my younger self.’

Everyone else in the Chen Household was proud of their young mistress Mo Lan.

That evening Mo Lan shared her concern with Chen Quan Ran.

‘Today I didn’t want the Northern Empire to lose to Southern Yue,’ Mo Lan said. ‘I’m worried Southern Yue will retaliate to regain their lost pride.’

‘Wife, what is there to be scared of?’ Chen Quan Ran asked. ‘If they want to use brute force to retaliate then the Chen army won’t be scared to fight against them.’ He hugged Mo Lan and consoled her. ‘Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter what happens, I’ll always be beside you and protect you for the rest of my life.’

Chapter 9

The citizens of the Northern Empire applauded General Chen’s wife’s wisdom.

The Chen Household received a second good news. Their young mistress Mo Lan was pregnant with General Chen’s child.

After Chen Quan Ran heard the good news he was even more affectionate and protective toward his precious wife.

While everyone at the Chen Manor were rejoicing, the palace released portraits of a Southern Yue spy suspect.

Xiao Ha returned from the palace and he showed Chen Quan Ran the strange portrait. Instead of a suspect’s face, the portrait showed a side profile of the suspect wearing a vintage earring.

‘Why does the earring look familiar to me?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

‘General Chen the timing is strange,’ Xiao Ha said. ‘Recently the Southern Yue Prince Jing Qi and General Fang visited the imperial city and now the emperor wants to capture a suspected Southern Yue spy.’

Mo Lan brought two bowls of soup into the calligraphy room.

‘Lieutenant Xiao, you’re here too,’ Mo Lan said. ‘It’s good I brought two bowls of soup. You should eat with Quan Ran too.’

‘Thank you young mistress,’ Xiao Ha said.

Chen Quan Ran frowned. ‘Xiao Lan you’re pregnant. You should let the maids and servants carry heavy objects. If something happens to our child then grandma won’t spare me.’

‘It’s not heavy,’ Mo Lan said. ‘Besides it’s good for our child for me to be active while pregnant.’

Mo Lan put the bowls of soup on the table and she noticed the portrait on the table looked familiar.

Chen Quan Ran received a shock after he looked carefully at Mo Lan’s side profile. He knew Mo Lan’s cheeks and red lips were soft. But it was her earrings that shocked him. His heart was beating fast. Her earrings were identical to the portrait of the spy suspect.

Xiao Ha knew something catastrophic happened because it was rare General Chen would show any signs of shock.

Mo Lan’s heart was beating fast too.

‘Spy?’ Mo Lan asked. ‘Me?’

Chen Quan Ran’s complexion paled. He grabbed the portrait and tore it to pieces.

‘What fool dare to accuse my wife being a spy?’ Chen Quan Ran asked. ‘After I catch the fool, I’ll skin the fool!’

Mo Lan touched her earrings and she didn’t know why there was a portrait of her earrings.

Xiao Ha recovered faster. ‘Young mistress, who gave you the earrings?’

‘For as long as I can remember I’ve always worn these earrings,’ Mo Lan said.

No one had talked about the identity of Mo Lan's parents. The Chen Household adopted her since she was a child. They told her that her parents died and they didn't know her parents' family name. She lived inside the Chen Manor for many years and it was an unspoken understanding between her and the Chen elders that they didn't want to talk about her parents' identity. But they gave her these earrings to wear and they told her that it was her mother's family heirloom passed onto her. That was why her mother's earrings were like an extension of herself and she didn't part with them even though she was given many more beautiful earrings to wear. It shocked her that her mother's earrings made her a spy suspect.

'It's a misunderstanding,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'I'll go to the palace and I'll ask the emperor to clear this misunderstanding.'

Suddenly imperial guards appeared. They surrounded the room and prevented Chen Quan Ran from leaving.

'What are you all doing here?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'Do you want to rebel? Why do you dare to inspect the Chen Manor that's under the emperor's protection?'

The head imperial guard disregarded General Chen's status and contributions to protecting the Northern Empire. The head imperial guard ordered the imperial guards to arrest General Chen's wife.

Chen Quan Ran was prepared to strike everyone who dared to arrest Mo Lan.

'Someone reported General Chen's wife is the spy suspect and we're here to arrest General Chen's wife,' the head imperial guard.

The head imperial guard passed Chen Quan Ran the same portrait that Chen Quan Ran teared.

'General Chen your wife's earrings matches the Southern Yue spy suspect,' the head imperial guard said. 'I hope General Chen will cooperate and hand over your wife for interrogation. I promise after the interrogation I'll return your wife to the Chen Manor.'

Chen Quan Ran laughed coldly. He wasn't going to let anyone take Mo Lan away from him.

'What will you do if I'm not going to let you take my wife away?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'General Chen this is the emperor's edict,' the head imperial guard said. 'The emperor gave us permission to use force to arrest the spy suspect.'

Chen Quan Ran and the imperial guards were at a standstill.

'I want to see who dares to take my granddaughter-in-law away from here!' Madam said and struck her staff on the floor.

The imperial guards' head ached enough to explode after they heard Madam's angry tone. Especially the head imperial guard who was scared to offend General Chen and General Chen's grandma. But the imperial guards' master was the emperor and they were forced to follow the emperor's orders.

The head imperial guard formally greeted Madam.

'Save the pleasantries!' Madam said. 'Didn't you say you wanted to take my good granddaughter-in-law away? What crime did my Xiao Lan commit for you to dare arrest her?'

'Someone reported General Chen's wife's identity is suspicious,' the head imperial guard said. 'We're here to arrest General Chen's wife for interrogation.'

'Dog shit!' Madam cursed.

Madam held up her staff and she didn't let any of the imperial guards near Mo Lan.

'Xiao Lan married into the Chen Household since she was nine years old,' Madam said. 'She had followed me for ten years. How can she be a Southern Yue spy? Everyone in the Chen Household are loyal to the

Northern Empire. My husband and son sacrificed their lives to protect the Northern Empire! I'm old but it doesn't mean my head is muddled. Everyone here knows clearly about Xiao Lan's contribution to the Northern Empire. Without Xiao Lan the Northern Empire would have lost Cai Ning to Southern Yue.'

Madam glared scornfully at the imperial guards.

'Because of a vague painting you little dog shits lost your heads and dared to accuse my Xiao Lan being a spy!' Madam cursed.

The head imperial guard was intimidated by Madam's glare.

'Did you know that inside Xiao Lan's stomach is my great-grandchild?' Madam asked. 'If anything happens to my great-grandchild then who will be held responsible?'

The imperial guards looked at each other. They didn't know what to do in a complicated situation.

'Madam everything you said is right,' the head imperial guard said. 'But Madam knows we're merely the emperor's servants and we need to follow the emperor's orders.'

Xiao Ha saw General Chen's eyes narrowed and he knew General Chen was enraged enough to flip the kingdom over.

Indeed Chen Quan Ran was enraged and his dangerous cold tone frightened the imperial guards.

'Today you people have two choices,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'You people can choose to stay here and prepare to die or you people can take a step toward me and see if I can be forced to step aside.'

The imperial guards looked at each other. They knew General Chen's threat was real and if they stepped forward then they would all lose their lives.

The head imperial guard knew it was safer for him and the imperial guards to retreat and think of an effective way to deal with the situation.

The imperial guards left the room and Chen Quan Ran kicked a nearby flower pot. Chen Quan Ran was enraged the emperor wanted to arrest his Mo Lan.

Madam empathised her grandson's feelings.

Chen Quan Ran composed himself after he noticed Mo Lan's frightened expression. He took a step toward her and hugged her.

'Xiao Lan, you don't need to be scared,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'I promise I won't let anyone take you away from me and I'll clear this misunderstanding soon.'

Although Chen Quan Ran held Mo Lan protectively against his chest, she was still worried she was a burden to the Chen Household because they were associated with her.

Later Chen Quan Ran visited the palace but the eunuchs informed him that the emperor was unwell and the emperor didn't want to see anyone.

The emperor's refusal to see Chen Quan Ran made him want to kill all the imperial guards.

The eunuchs feared for their lives. They ran to report to the emperor.

'What is it?' the emperor asked.

'It's General Chen...' a young eunuch said.

The emperor gave the young eunuch a piece of paper to give to Chen Quan Ran.

The young eunuch reluctantly passed the piece of paper to Chen Quan Ran.

‘General Chan, the emperor asked me to give this you,’ the young eunuch said. ‘The emperor said you’ll understand clearly after you see this.’

The eunuch was too scared to wait for Chen Quan Ran’s reply so the eunuch ran away.

Chen Quan Ran didn’t have the patience to read. But he grudgingly read what the emperor wanted to say. Then he was angry enough to make everyone in the palace faint.

After Chen Quan Ran returned to the Chen Manor, Madam and Mo Lan knew from his dark expression that nothing went smoothly in the palace.

‘Quan Ran did you see the emperor?’ Madam asked.

‘What emperor?’ Chen Quan Ran asked. ‘The emperor hid in his chamber. He rather die than see me. I know he’s in a difficult situation but this time he made me extremely angry.’

Chen Quan Ran passed the piece of paper to his grandma. Mo Lan was sitting next to his grandma and she saw the content of the piece of paper too.

‘During the Southern Yue’s Prince Jing Qi and General Fang’s visit, Tu Qing Mu asked General Fang about his unique jade pendant. General Fang said it was his most precious jade pendant. He gave the woman he loved a pair of earrings that matched the design of his jade pendant. Tu Qing Mu asked a painter to replicate the design of General Fang’s unique jade pendant and took the painting home. Chen Luo Yu was a guest at General Fang’s home and he showed her the painting. Chen Luo Yu told General Fang the jade pendant design matched General Chen’s wife’s earrings. Tu Qing Min didn’t hesitate and he asked the painter to paint the earrings Chen Luo Yu described. Tu Qing Min used the painting to investigate General Chen’s wife’s identity. Fang Mu Chu was older than forty years old and in his life he only loved one woman. He didn’t know what happened to the woman he loved after they

separated but apart from her, he didn't want to marry anyone else. Mo Lan who married into the Chen Household at the age of nine was Fang Mu Chu's blood daughter because her mother's family heirloom was the love token Feng Mu Chu gave her mother.'

Everyone in the Chen Household understood Tu Qing Min used Mo Lan's birth identity as a way to step on Chen Quan Ran's head. Tu Qing Min couldn't behead Chen Quan Ran to avenge his nephew's death but he could cause tension between Chen Quan Ran and the emperor. Of course the emperor couldn't let an enemy general's blood daughter stay in the imperial city.

Mo Lan appeared calm after receiving the shocking news. How could her father be Fang Mu Chu? She knew the tension between the Northern Empire and Southern Yue was big enough for a small spark to inflame both kingdoms to go to war with each other.

Mo Lan knew if her birth identity was made public then she couldn't stay in the Chen Household. Because one day when the Northern Empire and Southern Yue are at war with each other, her father would be her husband's enemy on the battlefield. How could she choose between her father and her husband?

Madam was worried to see Mo Lan's white complexion. She hated seeing anyone upset Mo Lan.

'Xiao Lan, you don't need to worry about this,' Madam said. She gently patted Mo Lan's hand to reassure Mo Lan. 'As long as Quan Ran and I are here, we won't let anyone harm you.'

Madam signalled Mo Lan to leave.

After Mo Lan left Madam's chamber, Chen Quan Ran looked sadly at Madam.

'Grandma, Xiao Lan followed you since she married me,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'You would know the most about her identity.'

‘Quan Ran do you know who Xiao Lan’s mother is?’ Madam asked.

Chen Quan Ran shook his head and he listened attentively to his grandma talk about Mo Lan’s mother. His heart sunk. How could it be true?

Later Chen Quan Ran returned to his chamber. His heartbroken wife was sitting on a chair.

Chen Quan Ran stood behind his wife and hugged her.

‘Xiao Lan are you still worried about your earrings?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Mo Lan turned around and she hugged Chen Quan Ran tighter.

‘My father... is he truly Fang Mu Chu?’ Mo Lan asked.

‘Little fool it doesn’t matter if he’s your father because you’ll always be my wife,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

Mo Lan was deeply moved by Chen Quan Ran’s words. Her hands gripped his hands that were holding onto her waist tightly. Her heart was in unbearable pain and tears flowed uncontrollably down her cheeks.

Chen Quan Ran was surprised Mo Lan didn’t say anything. Instead she pushed him back and she gave him a letter.

‘What is this?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran read the letter and his gentleness disappeared.

‘A divorce letter?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Chen Quan Ran didn’t understand why Mo Lan would ask him to divorce her.

‘The divorce letter is clear,’ Mo Lan said in a choked voice. ‘A man has the right to divorce his wife for shameful misconduct, mistreating her

husband, disrespectful toward elders and doesn't take good care of her husband's family... you only need to sign at the bottom of the letter and from this day onward I have no association with the Chen Household.'

Chen Quan Ran's shaky hands held the letter.

'What are you saying?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'You can divorce me,' Mo Lan said softly. 'If you divorce me then it wouldn't matter who my father is and no one can use me to soil the Chen Household's reputation.'

Mo Lan thought thoroughly about what she must do to protect the Chen Household. It would be hard for her to leave Chen Quan Ran and Madam. But she didn't want them to be forced to choose between her and their loyalty toward the Northern Empire. She didn't want them to oppose the emperor and be accused of treason because of her. So if Chen Quan divorced her then he and Madam's lives would be spared. She owed Madam a lot for raising her and loving her for ten years.

'Divorce you?' Chen Quan Ran asked angrily. He almost vomited blood. 'Xiao Lan is your head muddled? Do you think if I divorce you then it'll resolve everything? Do you think if I divorce you the court officials who want my head will beg the emperor to spare everyone at the Chen Manor? Do you think if I divorce you there'll be world peace?'

It was the first time Chen Quan Ran raised his voice while speaking to Mo Lan.

Chen Quan Ran shook the letter in front of Mo Lan.

'Xiao Lan if one day I'm accused of committing a crime, would you also ask me to divorce you?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'That way you can end any association with the Chen Household and escape punishment.'

Chen Quan Ran was angrily raising his voice at Mo Lan and made her sob loudly.

Chen Quan Ran forced himself not to immediately comfort Mo Lan after he heard her pitiful sob.

‘If you’re capable of doing something foolish like this because you care about the Chen Household then I don’t know what other foolish things you’re capable of,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘What kind of person do you see me as?’

‘I...’ Mo Lan said.

‘What I?’ Chen Quan Ran asked.

Mo Lan’s foolishness made Chen Quan Ran angry to death.

‘Next time if you dare wave a divorce letter in front of me,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘I don’t care if you’ll regret it and want to stay with me. I won’t keep a wife who is scared of being associated with the Chen Household since she doesn’t want to be implicate herself. Because a coward isn’t suited to be my wife.’

Chen Quan Ran’s cruel words made Mo Lan sob uncontrollably. It was obvious she had good intentions but he heartlessly cursed and scolded her.

Chen Quan Ran had trouble scolding Mo Lan. Her tears melted his heart. He wiped tears off her face and hugged her.

‘Don’t cry anymore,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Earlier I raised my voice a little but you were wrong too. Aren’t we husband and wife? Even if I must die, I’ll still die with you.’

Mo Lan’s body didn’t stop trembling against Chen Quan Ran’s chest.

‘Besides I won’t let anyone kill you or me,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Whatever trouble you face, I’ll always be here to help you overcome them.’

That evening Chen Quan Ran stayed in bed and comforted his wife until she stopped crying and fell asleep. Then he carefully got out of bed and put on his clothes.

Chen Quan Ran flew over many roofs and he landed on a bridge where Chen Luo Yu waited a long time for him.

‘General...’ Chen Luo Yu said.

Under the moonlight, Chen Quan Ran smiled coldly at Chen Luo Yu’s beautiful face.

‘What is it you need to say to me?’ Chen Quan Ran asked coldly.

‘I’m truly sorry... I didn’t know the situation would escalate to this,’ Chen Luo Yu said.

Chen Luo Yu easily recognised the familiar painting design Tu Fang Su showed her. She only wanted to harm Mo Lan. She didn’t expect the Chen Household would be accused of treason. When she went to the Chen Manor to explain, the guards prevented her from entering the Chen Manor. She could only beg Xiao Ha to ask Chen Quan Ran to see her on the bridge closest to the Chen Manor. She waited for Chen Quan Ran most of the night.

After Chen Quan Ran knew Chen Luo Yu betrayed him and his wife, he regretted letting a wolf like Chen Luo Yu into his family’s home. If it wasn’t Chen Luo Yu who told Tu Qing Min about Mo Lan’s earrings then others wouldn’t find out about Mo Lan’s identity.

‘I don’t care if you purposely or accidentally betrayed my family,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘From today onward I never want to see you again.’

‘General-’ Chen Luo Yu said.

‘I only came here because I considered our sworn brother bond in the past,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Although I don’t want to blame you for everything that happened but it was your carelessness that put my

family in danger. I didn't expect someone who I saw as a sworn brother was a jinx to the Chen Household.'

Chen Luo Yu's heart bled, Chen Quan Ran's words were deadly cold.

'I won't take revenge on you but I'll never forgive you,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'From today onward we have no relation to each other and we'll never meet again.'

Chen Quan Ran leapt off the bridge and flew home to his wife.

Chen Luo Yu stayed behind on the bridge and she cried the rest of the night.

Chapter 10

Tu Qing Min and other court officials pressured the emperor to demote General Chen.

Chen Quan Ran didn't want the situation to worsen so he escorted Mo Lan to the palace for interrogation.

The emperor worried about the safety of his closest friend Chen Quan Ran's family. He sent some of his personal guards to secretly follow and protect Chen Quan Ran and Mo Lan.

Many court officials attended Mo Lan's interrogation and they hoped Mo Lan would be convicted of treason. Because they feared General Chen's power and they were scared their fates would end up like Tu Lang if they offended General Chen. Tu Lang's death was a warning to them that the emperor favored General Chen over them.

The emperor wouldn't have sat on the throne without marrying court officials' relatives. The emperor felt powerless to protect Chen Quan Ran against the court officials' collusion.

Many court officials supported Tu Qing Min because they believed after the emperor died, the emperor would pass the throne to Consort Tu's

son. Tu Qin Min would be more powerful than General Chen after Tu Qin Min became the next emperor's grandfather.

'General Chen although you and your family have contributed to founding and protecting the Northern Empire but your wife is Fang Mu Chu's daughter,' Tu Qing Mu said. 'Your wife is a threat to the survival of the Northern Empire.'

'Yes my wife is Fang Mu Chu's daughter,' Chen Quan Ran said calmly. 'What do you want to do about it?'

Chen Quan Ran looked resentfully at the court officials and the emperor. Then he looked lovingly at Mo Lan.

'My wife lost her mother at a young age,' Chen Quan Ran. 'She married me at the age of nine. For ten years she hasn't committed any wrong against the Chen Household and the Northern Empire. If it wasn't for my wife's wisdom then Southern Yue would have possessed Cai Ning and invaded the Northern Empire. Look at yourselves, because of a pair of earrings you accuse my wife of being a Southern Yue spy and used it as an excuse to sentence the Chen Household to death.'

Chen Quan Ran pointed accusingly at each of the court officials.

'That day why didn't any of you ask your daughters to stand up against Southern Yue?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'Yet today all of you gang up together to bully a weak woman.'

Everyone felt threatened by Chen Quan Ran's sternness and they couldn't refute the truth.

The emperor didn't say anything but his heart praised Chen Quan Ran for standing up against a group of worms that only know how to eat and wait for death.

'Official Tu, do you know what my priority after I returned to the imperial city was?' Chen Quan Ran asked. 'To return justice to your nephew's victims.'

Mo Lan thought her husband was fearless against causing havoc. Her husband was rubbing salt onto Tu Qing Min's wound. After she heard the conviction in her husband's words she realised there was no reason for her to fear being a liability for the Chen Household.

Tu Qing Min was angered by Chen Quan Ran's flaunting his nephew's death but he didn't show his anger in front of the court officials and the emperor.

'General Chen, you don't need to use a vicious tone to speak,' Tu Qing Min said. 'I'm not interrogating your wife to take revenge on you. This is an official interrogation. Keeping an enemy spy in the imperial city is a serious offence.'

'General Chen, you know the clearest about the ongoing tensions between the Northern Empire and Southern Yue,' Tu Qing Min said.

Tu Qing Min glanced coldly at Mo Lan.

'General Chen it is true your wife's wisdom is infamous,' Tu Qing Min said. 'But what happens when the Northern Empire and Southern Yue are at war with each other? I fear General Chen's conflict of interest will affect your ability to protect the Northern Empire and put all our lives at risk.'

Tu Qing Min's words were reasonable and made Tu Qing Min appear like a patriotic citizen. But Tu Qing Min's words infuriated Chen Quan Ran, he couldn't tolerate Tu Qing Min implicating his wife as the catalyst for Southern Yue to invade the Northern Empire. He wanted to behead Tu Qing Min, cut Tu Qing Min into pieces to feed dogs.

An imperial guard rushed into the room while Chen Quan Ran was contemplating murderous thoughts.

'Your majesty... General Fang is here to see you,' the imperial guards said.

Everyone was surprised Fang Mu Chu would return to the imperial city after his recent visit.

Fang Mu Chu's second visit was peaceful so he only brought two personal guards to the imperial city.

Fang Mu Chu's intimidating aura frightened the court officials especially Tu Qing Min who dared to interrogate Fang Mu Chu's daughter.

Fang Mu Chu dismissed the court official's presence. He bowed to the emperor, stood and his complex eyes looked at Mo Lan.

Fang Mu Chu stepped toward Mo Lan.

'Can I... see your earrings?' Fang Mu Chu asked.

The first time Mo Lan met Fang Mu Chu she thought she was meeting an enemy general. But their second meeting was acknowledgement of their father and daughter bond. She couldn't control her composure while her father stood in front of her. She felt a connection with her father before she knew they were related by blood. Her connection with her father was stronger after she knew the truth about her birth.

Mo Lan took off her earrings and she passed it to her father.

Chen Quan Ran stood protectively next to Mo Lan while Fang Mu Chu inspected Mo Lan's earrings.

'Indeed you're Xiao Sheng's daughter,' Fang Mu Chu said in a shaky voice.

Fang Mu Chu thought Mo Lan had Xiao Sheng's eyes and his lips. His hands clutched the earrings like he wanted the earrings to blend into his flesh.

Mo Lan and Chen Quan Ran exchanged a look with each other while the court officials didn't know what to do about the father and daughter reunion between General Fang and Mo Lan. Only the emperor stayed

calm like even if the emperor lost the kingdom it wouldn't have affected the emperor's calmness.

'Your majesty, I pledge as long as I'm alive I promise Southern Yue will never invade the Northern Empire,' Fang Mu Chu said.

Fang Mu Chu pulled out a treaty and he passed it to the emperor's personal eunuch.

The eunuch gave the treaty to the emperor. The emperor read the treaty, 'Southern Yue promises to treat the Northern Empire as a brother kingdom and wants to maintain a peaceful bond with the Northern Empire.'

The emperor was happy to have a peaceful resolution between his kingdom and Southern Yue.

'But... I have a request I hope your majesty will grant,' Fang Mu Chu said.

'General Fang, what is your request?' the emperor asked.

Fang Mu Chu pointed a condemning finger at Tu Qing Min.

'I want him beheaded!' Fang Mu Chu said.

Everyone was as startled as Tu Qing Min.

'You... you dare to stand here and demand a Northern Empire's court official's head?' Tu Qing Min asked in a panicked tone.

Fang Mu Chu laughed coldly. 'Earlier I heard your strong sense of patriotism. Aren't you willing to sacrifice your life for peace in the Northern Empire?'

'Your majesty... I beg of you not grant his outrageous request,' Tu Qing Min said.

The emperor rubbed his chin to appear he was in deep consideration. 'It is good news General Fang came here to offer a treaty... but official Tu...

wasn't it you who stood in front of me and talked about your willingness to sacrifice your life for the sake of the Northern Empire? You've tied my hands.'

Chen Quan Ran realised the emperor had schemed to behead Tu Qing Min from the start. He knew the emperor used someone else's dagger to earn the kingdom's respect.

Chen Quan Ran and the emperor exchanged a secret glance at each other.

Chen Quan Ran suppressed his anger. His heart cursed the MF emperor. Why didn't the emperor confide the scheme to him? The emperor caused him to shed a lot of hair from worrying about how to save his wife's life.

Even the court officials finally understood it was the emperor's scheme to behead Tu Qing Min from the start. They quickly lowered their heads out of fear Fang Mu Chu would also demand their heads for not defending Fang Mu Chu's daughter's integrity.

After the emperor accepted Fang Mu Chu's treaty, Fang Mu Chu and Mo Lan dripped their blood drops into a bowl of water. Indeed Fang Mu Chu and Mo Lan's blood drops mixed and they officially acknowledged their father and daughter bond.

It was Madam who told Mo Lan that her mother was the Northern Empire's Princess Long Xue Sheng.

Princess Long Xue Sheng was a mischievous princess. The same year Mo Lan was born, Princess Long Xue Sheng sneaked out of the palace and she was captured by bandits. A gentleman rescued Princess Long Xue Sheng. She thought the gentleman was a citizen of the Northern Empire. But the gentleman was Fang Mu Chu who visited the imperial city on a secret mission. Princess Long Xue Sheng and Fang Mu Chu deeply loved each other before knowing each other's identity. Fang Mu Chu gave his mother's family heirloom, the earrings with the same design as his jade pendant to Princess Long Xue Sheng as a love token and a

promise to marry her. But the timing of their love was ill fated. That year the Northern Empire and Southern Yue were battling each other to conquer neighbouring territories. Fang Mu Chu was born into a military family and he was forced to leave Princess Long Xue to fight against her kingdom.

Fang Mu Chu regretted choosing Southern Yue over Princess Long Xue Sheng.

Fang Mu Chu remembered the last day he spent with Princess Long Xue Sheng.

'Mu Chu will you give up Southern Yue for me?' Princess Long Xue Sheng asked.

'No,' Fang Mu Chu said.

The following day Princess Long Xue Sheng disappeared from Fang Mu Chu's life. He searched everywhere for Long Princess Xue Sheng but he didn't get to even glance at her ever again.

Princess Long Xue Sheng didn't return to the palace. She was an unwed pregnant woman. If she returned to the palace then Mo Lan would have been killed. She struggled to stay alive to give birth to Mo Lan during the war. She asked the senior General Chen to raise Mo Lan but she didn't reveal the identity of Mo Lan's father because she didn't want to endanger Mo Lan's life.

Fang Mu Chu wished he had chosen love over duty. If he did then Princess Long Xue Sheng would still be alive and they could have raised their daughter together.

Fang Mu Chu was a man of few words. He was happy to sit opposite his daughter, but he didn't know what to say.

Mo Lan usually had a fast tongue. But she didn't know what to say first to her father.

‘Does the little boy Chen treat you well?’ Fang Mu Chu asked.

Although Fang Mu Chu saw the love between his daughter and son-in-law, he wanted to hear his daughter confirm his thoughts.

‘Yes... general,’ Mo Lan said.

‘You inherited your mother’s beauty and intelligence,’ Fang Mu Chu said.

Mo Lan felt a little shy. She’d never seen her mother but by the faraway look in her father’s eyes whenever he looked at her, made her realise that her father must have loved her mother deeply.

‘Can you call me father?’ Fang Mu Chu asked.

Mo Lan felt awkward but she opened her mouth. ‘Father...’

‘Tomorrow I need to return to Southern Yue,’ Fang Mu Chu said.

‘Whenever you want to see me, you can ask little boy Chen to escort you to see me in Southern Yue.’

Fang Mu Chu turned to look at Chen Quan Ran who was standing at the door. ‘Why are you still weary of me? I’m not taking my daughter away from you.’

‘Father don’t misunderstand... I was passing by,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘I didn’t intend to eavesdrop.’

It was obvious to everyone in the room Chen Quan Ran confessed before a confession was forced out of him.

Mo Lan gave Chen Quan Ran an I-don’t-believe-you look.

Fang Mu Chu was happy to see his daughter and son-in-law looked lovingly at each other.

In the past, war between the Northern Empire and Southern Yue separated Fang Mu Chu and Princess Long Xue Sheng. Fang Mu Chu

didn't want his daughter and son-in-law to share the same ill fate as him and Princess Long Xue Sheng.

'I only have one precious daughter,' Fang Mu Chu said to Chen Quan Ran. 'Since the two kingdoms have declared a truce then when you're free escort my daughter to Southern Yue to see me. All these years I never had the chance to fulfil my duties as her father. My daughter is married to you. But if you treat her badly then I won't spare you.'

'Father be reassured,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'Xiao Lan is treasured by the Chen Household. In her stomach is my child. Even if father wasn't a formidable general, I would still love Xiao Lan for the rest of my life.'

Mo Lan's face turned red as the skin of a red apple.

Fang Mu Chu smiled affectionately. 'My daughter is blessed to have a man like you who truly loves her.'

'Father you praised me too much,' Chen Quan Ran said.

Fang Mu Chu reluctantly left the room. Mo Lan's eyes stung. She didn't want to be separated from her father too soon after their reunion.

'Xiao Lan you should be happy to be reunited with your father,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'Besides your father is someone who is admired by both kingdoms. You should be proud to be his daughter.'

'But my father will be leaving soon...' Mo Lan said.

'I promise I'll take you to see your old father in Southern Yue when we're free,' Chen Quan Ran said.

'My father isn't an old man,' Mo Lan protested.

'Yes, yes,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'Your father is young and handsome. He doesn't look like an old man.'

Mo Lan smiled and she held Chen Quan Ran's hand. 'Do you promise you'll take me to see my father when we're free?'

Chen Quan Ran nodded his head. 'Wherever you want to go, no matter how faraway it is, I'll take you there.'

'Quan Ran thank you for standing by me,' Mo Lan said.

'What are you thanking me for?' Chen Quan Ran asked.

'Thank you for treating me well,' Mo Lan said. 'Thank you for not turning your back on me, thank you for opposing the kingdom for me and most importantly thank you for... thank you for loving me and making me feel like the happiest woman in the world.'

Mo Lan felt embarrassed declaring her love. She wanted to run away but Chen Quan Ran hugged her tightly and kissed her lips.

One year later the Chen Household held a one month celebration for the new generation of Chen offspring.

Chen Quan Ran felt blessed the first time he got to be a father, his wife gave him a son and a daughter.

Madam was proud to hold her great-grandchildren in her arms and show them off to the guests.

Fang Mu Chu delivered to the Chen Manor many rare gifts for his grandchildren.

In the palace after Tu Qing Min was beheaded, the court officials behaved themselves and focused on performing their imperial duties. Because Tu Qing Min was a future mirror of what would happen to them if they dare to pull a tiger's beard.

After Chen Quan Ran's children's one month celebration, he visited the emperor in the palace and resigned his general position.

'What is this?' the emperor asked.

'This is the imperial army seal,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'The Northern Empire and its biggest threat are sharing a peace treaty. There is no need for me to hold onto this. It's the right time for me to resign.'

The emperor looked unhappily at Chen Quan Ran.

‘Your majesty you don’t need to look at me like I’m abandoning you,’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘I’ve trained Xiao Ha for many years. I believe he’ll be a good general. The army will be in safe hands under his guidance.’

The emperor frowned. ‘Are you still angry at me for wanting to arrest your wife a year ago?’

‘I thought your majesty had forgotten,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘How can I forget?’ the emperor asked. ‘Each time you visit me, you either look at me like you have no respect left for me or you look at me like you can’t trust me. It pains my heart each time I see the distant look in your eyes.’

‘Nonsense!’ Chen Quan Ran said. ‘Your majesty, I can understand if you need to scheme for the good of the kingdom. But you could have confided in me. Did you know how I felt... it doesn’t matter anymore. I understand you have many responsibilities as an emperor but I truly don’t want the general position anymore.’

‘But when you were five you promised me you’ll be my loyal general and that you’ll never betray me,’ the emperor said.

‘Your majesty, I haven’t betrayed you,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘You haven’t betrayed me but you want to leave me,’ the emperor said.

‘In the past I neglected my wife for ten years,’ Chen Quan Ran said.

‘Now I want to spend my time with my wife and take her to see the world to compensate for all the years I wasted.’

‘I won’t force you to stay,’ the emperor said. ‘But I’ll keep this imperial army seal for you. Xiao Ha will be your temporary substitute. If there comes a day the Northern Empire needs you then I’ll return this imperial army seal to you.’

Chen Quan Ran accepted the emperor's compromise. Like the emperor, he knew a peaceful period wouldn't last forever. He was loyal to his kingdom and military blood ran through his veins, he wouldn't turn his back on the kingdom in their time of need.

Chen Quan Ran returned to the Chen Manor and he informed Mo Lan his decision.

'Quan Ran, are you truly giving up the army to the emperor?' Mo Lan asked.

'Yes,' Chen Quan Ran said.

'But... I know you see your men as your blood brothers,' Mo Lan said. 'You also love performing the duties of a general whether it's on the battlefield or taking care of the army.'

'My bond with my men won't change if I'm not their general,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'I want to spend this peaceful period with you. The truth is I rather spend time in bed with you to strengthen our bond than being on the battlefield.'

Mo Lan kicked Chen Quan Ran's leg. 'Quan Ran, you're a father. How can you still be a scoundrel?'

'Wife, I'm only a scoundrel with you,' Chen Quan Ran said. 'Xiao Lan don't run away. Let's conceive more children. Our home can support a small army of Chen children. When our children grow up, they'll be proud to be each other's siblings.'

'Stay away,' Mo Lan said. 'Who wants to conceive more children with you?'

'Let's conceive...' Chen Quan Ran said.

'Stay away!' Mo Lan said.

'Xiao Lan, you're extremely aggressive,' Chen Quan Ran teased.

Mo Lan didn't know how to escape the bed.

Outside the chamber, Madam was holding her great-grandson in her left arm and her great-granddaughter in her right arm. She was happy her grandson and granddaughter-in-law were making more great-grandchildren for her. She took her one-month-old great-grandchildren back to her chamber so that they wouldn't disturb the conception of their younger siblings.

{The End}